

**TROZE**

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**‘Honest Jack Parsons’  
of the Falmouth  
Packets:  
Home from the Sea**

*By Dr J. Mitchell Noon*

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## **TROZE**

Troze is the journal of the National Maritime Museum Cornwall whose mission is to promote an understanding of small boats and their place in people's lives, and of the maritime history of Cornwall.

'Troze: the sound made by water about the bows of a boat in motion'  
From R. Morton Nance, *A Glossary of Cornish Sea Words*

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### **Dr J. Mitchell Noon**

James ('Mitch') Noon lives in and loves Falmouth. He retired from the NHS about 4 years ago. Formerly he was a Consultant Clinical Psychologist and Head of Psychology for the Royal Cornwall Hospital Trust. He has also worked as a university lecturer and remains an Honorary Fellow of the Peninsula Medical and Dental School. He has published a book and several papers on psychological topics, but in matters nautical he is a hopeless land-lubber and is very grateful to Commander John Parsons RN for teaching him a little about naval history.

He also wishes to express his thanks to Cathryn Pearce for her patient editorial guidance.

# ‘Honest Jack Parsons’ of the Falmouth Packets: Home from the Sea

*Dr. J Mitchell Noon*

‘To live means to leave traces.’ Walter Benjamin

## Introduction

This is an account of a town, a street, a person, two ships and a house. But it starts with a mail bag. In the National Maritime Museum Cornwall there is a packet mail bag, found in a Falmouth attic, inscribed ‘H.M.S. Crane Letters for England’. The final voyage of the *Crane* from Falmouth was on 6 September 1850. She was commanded by Lt John Parsons, RN, a consummate sailor who, for reasons that will become clear, was also known as ‘Honest Jack Parsons’. Three months, three weeks and three days after departing, the *Crane* returned to Falmouth from Rio on 29 December 1850 with five passengers and about £10,000 worth of freight. This was her last voyage as a packet vessel.<sup>1</sup>

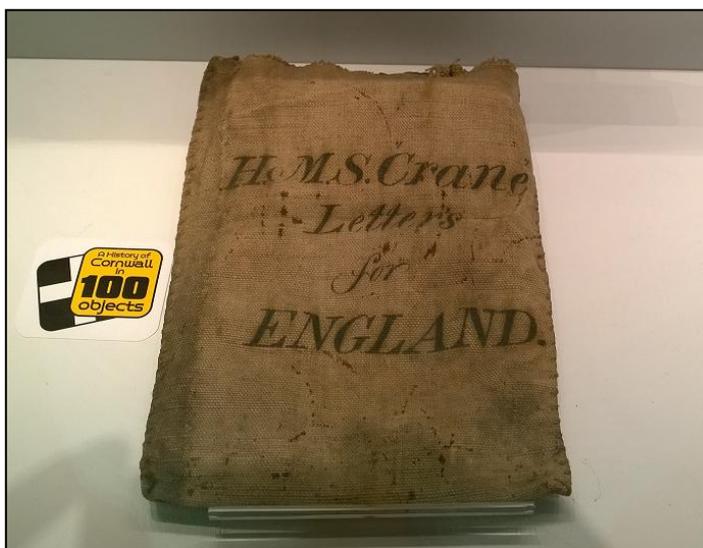


Figure 1: HMS Crane's mail bag, National Maritime Museum Cornwall.  
Source: Author's collection.

Lt Parsons's name is familiar to me. He built the house in which I am writing this account, Tresilian in Woodlane, Falmouth. I am fortunate to have the original deeds to Tresilian and through these I have been able to discover a little about the house and its occupants over the years and, in particular, Lt John Parsons, in whose attic, perhaps, the above mailbag was found. In this article I will provide a brief account of Lt Parsons's life at sea and his domicile. My aim is to consider the connexion between this Packet commander and the home he built in Falmouth in 1849, in which he lived until his death in 1864.

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<sup>1</sup> The British Museum and the BBC: *A History of the World*.  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/objects/ILbAs5yYR3qb4K8OVdM9w> Accessed 12 March 2014.

## The Town: Falmouth

Falmouth is a relatively recent town, established by royal charter in 1661 during the reign of Charles II. Before that the area was known to seafarers as a safe haven for passing vessels, sparsely populated with perhaps one or two fishing huts and known variously as Pen-y-cum-gwic (the head of the creek valley<sup>2</sup>) and Smithick.<sup>3</sup> Despite its remoteness, since around the end of the 14th century the area had been the seat of the Killigrew family. Their manor of Arwenack, before the fire of 1646, was considered one of the finest buildings in the county. The family occupied an estate incorporating present day Falmouth and running west as far as the Helford River. There was also a garrison on the headland. From between 1540 and 1545 Pendennis Castle was erected by order of Henry VIII on land leased from the Killigrew estate, to provide the most westerly of a chain of defences against Spanish and French invasion.

Despite Falmouth’s relative isolation, there were the seeds of prosperity, augmented by the fact that the Fal Estuary possesses particular natural advantages: it is said to be the third largest natural deep-water estuary in the world and the deepest in Western Europe.<sup>4</sup> It also provides safe haven for vessels sailing from the Western approaches. These attributes were noted by Sir Walter Raleigh, Lieutenant-General of the County of Cornwall, when he put into Falmouth harbour on a return voyage from Guiana in 1595.<sup>5</sup> He was accommodated at Arwenack Manor, but his crew suffered less commodious quarters nearby. This caused Sir Walter to petition Parliament for the provision of better accommodation for visiting seafarers: saying ‘that the goodness of the Harbour was such, as to be defective in nothing, but the want of shelter for seafaring men’.<sup>6</sup> The cause was taken up with relish by Sir John Killigrew, who spent much time and money pursuing his ambition to create a large and profitable harbour town. His efforts bore fruit: by 1664, Falmouth had grown from a small hamlet to a bustling sea-port with 200 houses; and by 1676 Sir John’s heir Sir Peter Killigrew had built the first town quay.<sup>7</sup>

## Falmouth and the Packet Mail Service

Falmouth has grown and prospered steadily ever since. One of the main spurs to growth in its early days was the establishment of the packet mail service. In 1688 Falmouth was selected by the Post Office as the most suitable base for its mail service to Corunna in Spain.<sup>8</sup> At that time there were just two locally owned ships, the *Spanish Allyance* and the *Spanish Expedition*,<sup>9</sup> leased by the Post Office from Falmouth’s first packet agent, Daniel Gwyn. By 1827 the numbers had risen to 39 packet ships and 1200 officers and men.<sup>10</sup> In 1830 Pigot’s Directory stated:

The trade and prosperity of Falmouth may be said to fluctuate perhaps less than any port town in the kingdom. In times of warfare it is frequently the resort of

<sup>2</sup> Anatoly Liberman, *Word Origins...And How We Know Them: Etymology for Everyone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of the etymology of Falmouth place names see H M Jeffery, ‘The Early Topography of Falmouth’, in *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*, Vol IX, 1886-1889 (Lake & Lake: Truro, 1889), p. 147.

<sup>4</sup> For instance: <http://www.falmouthport.co.uk/commercial/html/history.php> Accessed 4 September 2014.

<sup>5</sup> A description of Raleigh’s voyage is given in *Charles W Elliot (Ed). Voyages and Travels: ancient and modern, with introductions, notes and illustrations* (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1910), p. 321. Available at <https://archive.org/stream/voyagestravelsan00newyuoft#page/n5/mode/2up> . Accessed 21 August 2014.

<sup>6</sup> R. Thomas, *History and Description of the Town and Harbour of Falmouth* (Falmouth: J. Trathan, 1827), p. 109; Daniel Lysons and Samuel Lysons, *Magna Britannica* (London: Cadell & Davis, 1814), p. 99.

<sup>7</sup> Falmouth Harbour Commissioners: *Important Dates in Falmouth’s History*.

[http://www.falmouthport.co.uk/commercial/html/documents/Dates\\_013.pdf](http://www.falmouthport.co.uk/commercial/html/documents/Dates_013.pdf). Accessed 12 August 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Norway, *History of the Post-Office Packet Service between the Years 1793-1815* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1895), p. 35. <https://archive.org/details/cu31924030165538>. Accessed 13 August 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Norway, *History of the Post-Office Packet Service*, p. 18. N.B. Susan Gay states that there were three: the *Allyance*, the *Expedition* and the *Prince*, in *Old Falmouth: The Story of the Town from the Days of the Killigrews to the Earliest Part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (London: Headley Bros, 1903), p. 115.

<sup>10</sup> David Mudd, *The Falmouth Packets* (Bodmin, Cornwall: Bossiney Books, 1978), p. 8; Thomas, *History and Description*, p. 104.

fleets; and it has a depot of naval stores, with proper officers: and being at all times the principal packet-station, there is consequently little relaxation from the bustle and life attendant upon a populous and prosperous sea-port.<sup>11</sup>

The packet service was also a source of great wealth for its agents, ship owners and commanders. There were two phases to the packet service: pre-Admiralty and post-Admiralty. From 1688 to 1823, when the packet service was in effect a franchise, and before it was administered by the Admiralty, it provided a business opportunity for those with the ways and means to benefit. Sometimes the methods used were not strictly ethical. For instance, in 1697, Daniel Gwyn was charged with fraud, investigated by Parliament and in 1699 divested of his office.<sup>12</sup> From 1823, however, as the Admiralty took full responsibility for the service, greater order was introduced with some degree of financial probity, although officers continued to enjoy a modest degree of private commerce.<sup>13</sup>

By one means or another, the packet service brought prosperity to Falmouth. But then, around 1830, just as it was reaching its peak, there was a change in the wind. The introduction of steam packet ships meant that voyages could be faster and more reliable, and independent of adverse weather. Also, the strategic advantage of the port of Falmouth during times of war had receded. By 1834 mails were shipped from Southampton, with its fast rail link to London, while Falmouth, which retained the mail service to the ‘Brazils’, became a costly diversion from the main routes. In 1850 Falmouth was disestablished as a packet port,<sup>14</sup> although it continued to maintain a maritime presence as a hub for ship servicing and orders.

And so, as steam superseded sail, Falmouth by degrees became marginal and ultimately irrelevant to the packet service it had fostered from its inception. Nevertheless, it left many positive traces. It left traces in the streets, buildings and businesses of Falmouth and Flushing. And traces can still be found of the people who lived and worked in these places: the mariners, shipping agents, and others associated with the packet service, such as Lt John Parsons, RN.

### The Domestic Heritage of the Falmouth Packet Service

As the packet service was growing, the population increased and the infrastructure around Falmouth expanded. Residences were required for packet commanders, commensurate with their wealth and status. Both Flushing and Greenbank in Falmouth had clear views of the inner harbour where packet ships were moored ‘... the families of captains and crews soon chose one or other of those places for residence, thereby bringing prosperity and a keen rivalry’.<sup>15</sup> In Flushing many fine houses were owned or leased by packet commanders. In New Road, Flushing, Capt. William Kempthorne lived next to Capt. Edward Pellew, who is thought to have been one of the models for Capt. Jack Aubrey in Patrick O’Brian’s *Master and Commander* novels.<sup>16</sup> Kempthorne had been Pellew’s protégé as a younger man and owed his advancement in the Navy to the latter’s patronage. They developed so close a friendship that in order to meet more freely they made a communicating

<sup>11</sup> *Pigot's Directory of Cornwall* (London & Manchester: Pigot & Co, 1830), p. 140.

<http://leicester.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p16445coll4/id/64257/rec/10>. Accessed 19 May 2014.

<sup>12</sup> British History Online, *House of Commons Journal*, Vol. 12 part 2. May 1699 (London: Institute of Historical Research, 1803), pp. 675-681. <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=39787>, p. 680. Accessed 14 August 2014.

<sup>13</sup> While illicit trading was prohibited amongst the lower ranks, officers were given some leeway. See Tony Pawlyn, *The Falmouth Packets 1689-1851* (Truro: Truran 2003), pp. 115-116.

<sup>14</sup> Hansard. *House of Commons Debate Post Office—Landing Mails at a Western Port.—Observations. 28 May 1869 vol. 196*, pp. 924-36. Available at: [http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1869/may/28/post-office-landing-mails-at-a-western#S3V0196P0\\_18690528\\_HOC\\_39](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1869/may/28/post-office-landing-mails-at-a-western#S3V0196P0_18690528_HOC_39). Accessed 1 September 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Arthur L Salmon, *The Cornwall Coast* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1910), p. 90. Available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/26907/26907-h/26907-h.htm>. Accessed 12 July 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Taylor, *Commander: The Life and Exploits of Britain's Greatest Frigate Captain* (London: Norton & Co, 2012), p. 4.

door in the wall between the two houses.<sup>17</sup> Other notable occupants of properties in New Road, Flushing included Capt. Edward Bayntun Yescombe, commander of the *King George* packet, who died of his wounds on a return voyage from Lisbon in 1803, having been attacked by a French privateer<sup>18</sup> and Capt. John Bull, the 'archetypal British sea-dog'<sup>19</sup> who built his Flushing house in 1799 before he constructed Marlborough Cottage in Falmouth, at Swanpool.<sup>20</sup>

Marlborough House is perhaps the most famous Falmouth house associated with the packet service. Known initially as Marlborough Cottage after the second of John Bull's packet ships, the *Duke of Marlborough*, it was built in 1810 and extended later.<sup>21</sup> Looking down to Falmouth Bay and the Manacles, it is a handsome house which stands as testament to Bull's material prosperity and the packet service's profitability.

In Falmouth the favoured area for packet commanders was Greenbank, with its views of the inner harbour and access to the moorings at Greenbank quay. Here officers leased properties or sometimes lodged temporarily in 'respectable houses': 'There are a great number of very respectable Lodging Houses, in the town and on Dunstanville Terrace, where Families and individuals, may enjoy every comfort and accommodation'.<sup>22</sup> Prominent amongst the Greenbank houses occupied by packet commanders were N<sup>o</sup> 1 Dunstanville Row, inhabited by Capt. William Dashwood. Further along in Dunstanville Terrace was Capt. John Knight's Montague House and next door Windsor House, the home of Capt. William Rogers, who gained great repute following his action against a French privateer on 1 October 1807. He is immortalised in Samuel Drummond's painting, 'Captain William Rogers capturing the *Jeune Richard*'.<sup>23</sup> Both houses are named after the occupants' respective packet ships.<sup>24</sup>

But times and fashions change and wealth fluctuates. Just as there were two phases to the packet service, the pre-Admiralty and the post-Admiralty, there were also two broad phases of house construction associated with packet commanders. By the latter phase much of Greenbank had been developed. To meet the expansion in demand, building spread west and south towards the hills overlooking Falmouth Bay.<sup>25</sup> However, as well as geographical changes, there were also differences reflecting wealth accrued by pre-Admiralty as compared with post-Admiralty packet commanders; the latter depended on a pension of half-pay to serve out their remaining years, rather than the wealth amassed by the former. For example, John Bull could afford to build a significant landscaped mansion for his retirement: 'His estate was notable for the extensive planting of elms, beech and oak, an orchard, 200 "pine asters" and 300 Scotch firs'.<sup>26</sup> John Parsons, on the other hand, could only aspire to a more modest suburban semi-detached residence, built on a comparatively small plot of land, 'heretofore part of a field late in the occupation of John Edey'.<sup>27</sup>

This relative constraint is reflected in the residences of his fellow retired

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<sup>17</sup> Taylor, *Commander*, p. 57.

<sup>18</sup> *Falmouth Packet Archives, 1688-1850*. <http://www.falmouth.packet.archives.dial.pipex.com/id151.htm>. Accessed 30 June 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Pawlyn, *The Falmouth Packets*, p. 45.

<sup>20</sup> Pawlyn, *The Falmouth Packets*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>21</sup> British Listed Buildings Website: <http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/en-460209-marlborough-house-falmouth->. Accessed 20 August 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas, *History and Description*, p. 97.

<sup>23</sup> 'Captain William Rogers capturing the *Jeune Richard*,' 1 October 1807.

<http://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/12071.html>. Accessed 15 August 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Pawlyn, *The Falmouth Packets*, p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> *Falmouth, Cornwall and Scilly Urban Survey Historic Characterisation for Regeneration* (Cornwall County Council, 2005) [http://www.historic-cornwall.org.uk/csus/towns/falmouth/csus\\_falmouth\\_report\\_2005R003.pdf](http://www.historic-cornwall.org.uk/csus/towns/falmouth/csus_falmouth_report_2005R003.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> *Falmouth, Cornwall and Scilly Urban Survey Historic Characterisation for Regeneration*, p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> *Deed of conveyance*, 27th February, 1849. Author's collection.

commanders of the time. For instance, in the census data from 1841 to 1881, amongst the various captains and commanders on half-pay or on active service, one can find eight retired Admiralty packet commanders residing in Falmouth. Of these, the majority lived around the Woodlane area, in Florence Place, Wodehouse Terrace, Woodlane Terrace and Clare Terrace and in two cases Woodlane itself. Many occupants originated from outside Cornwall, but chose to retire to their familiar port.<sup>28</sup> And while Woodlane lacked the ‘front-row’ grandeur of Greenbank and views of the inner harbour and moorings, it nonetheless provided a good prospect of Falmouth Bay:

Wood Lane Terrace, Grove Hill, and the several houses in Wood Lane, front towards the English Channel, having before them Falmouth Bay, with its bold shores and head-lands terminating on the left by the peninsula and castle of Pendennis, and on the right by the Manacles Point.<sup>29</sup>

It is likely that this pleasant aspect was part of the attraction for the later generation of retiring packet commanders who might still gaze out to sea and recall their former exploits.

### The Street: Woodlane, Falmouth

We turn, then, to the Street. In the early records of Falmouth, Woodlane was a tranquil country path running through the deer park of the Killigrew family’s Arwenack estate, leading towards the nearby cove and swannery at Swanpool. ‘Then there was the old Woodlane, which ended about halfway of its present length, in grassy banks and wild flowers, no house on the upper side having been built beyond. It had the air of a country walk, leading towards Swanpool’, thus wrote Susan Gay.<sup>30</sup> She had known Falmouth as a child and later, as an adult, remarked on its many changes in her 1903 history *Old Falmouth*.

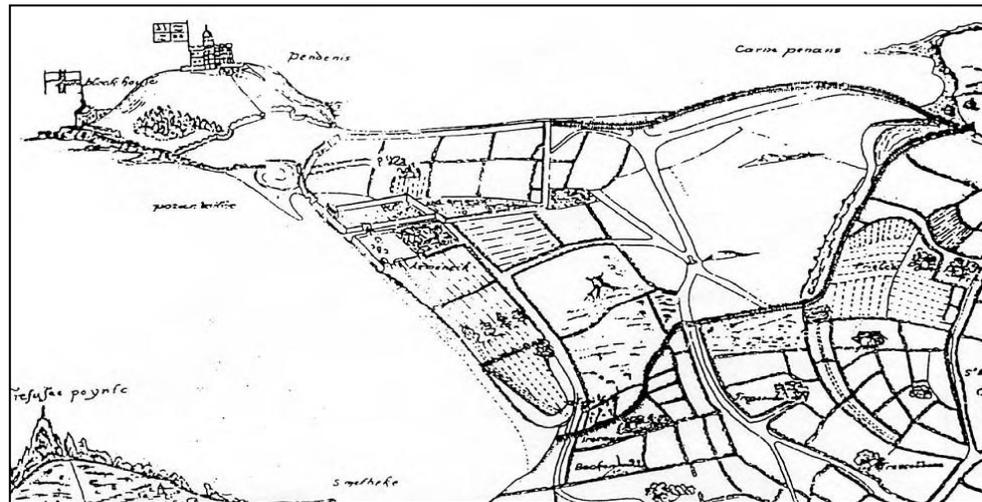


Figure 2: Detail from the Burghley map, c 1580 (reproduced in Jeffery 1886). Note the windmill field and, to its right, “the cross at the end of the present Woodlane”.

Source: H M Jeffery, *The Early Topography of Falmouth*, in *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*, Vol IX, 1886-1889 (Lake & Lake: Truro, 1889).

A map, dated 1580, shows the area with particular reference to Arwenack House, just northwest of Pendennis castle on the headland, ‘with the lawn in front bounded by a battlemented wall at the water’s edge, the “windmill” field, the cross at the end

<sup>28</sup> UK Census Online. <http://www.freecen.org.uk/cgi/search.pl>; and Cornwall Online Census Project. [http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~kayhin/cocp\\_1841.html](http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~kayhin/cocp_1841.html), both accessed 23 April 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas, *History and Description*, p. 85.

<sup>30</sup> Gay, *Old Falmouth*, p. 2.

of the present Woodlane ...<sup>31</sup>

By the mid-19th century, however, around the time of Susan Gay’s childhood reminiscences, Woodlane in its present form began to take shape.<sup>32</sup> And at the time of the 1880 ordnance survey map of Cornwall,<sup>33</sup> Woodlane and Lt John Parson’s house, Tresilian, were well-established. Parsons made his own mark on the map of Falmouth, both metaphorically through his occupation as a packet commander and literally through the home he built. He was just one of many who left his traces in the growth and development of Falmouth, but his history reveals him to be a singular man.

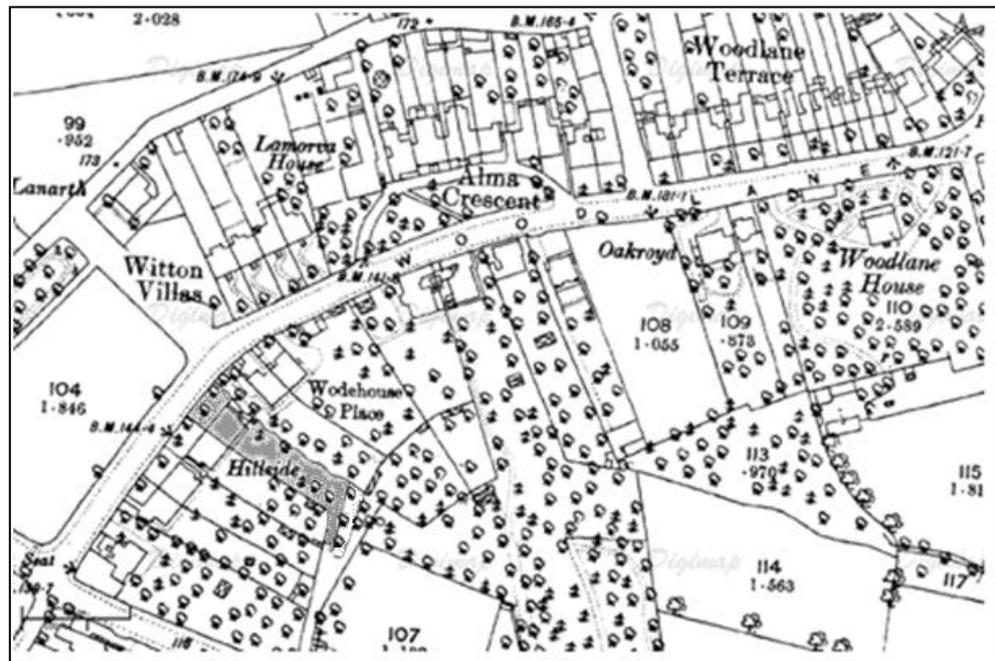


Figure 3: Woodlane, Falmouth in 1880. Tresilian is the house and garden shaded grey in the left bottom quadrant.

Source: Ordnance Survey County Series (1:2500), 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, Cornwall, 1880.  
<http://edina.ac.uk/digimap/ancientroam/historic> Accessed 21 June 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Gay, *Old Falmouth*, p. 7; Heritage Gateway Website: “A map of 1580 ... shows a windmill at approximately this location as a square gabled structure, with a long flight of steps to the doorway. It is thought to have been situated on the upper side of wood lane, towards the town end ...; the site was known as windmill field.”

[http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results\\_Single.aspx?uid=MCO25046&resourceID=1020](http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=MCO25046&resourceID=1020), Accessed 20 August 2014.

<sup>32</sup> *Falmouth, Cornwall and Scilly Urban Survey Historic Characterisation for Regeneration*, p. 29.

<sup>33</sup> *Ordnance Survey Map of Cornwall 1:2500 scale*, County Series Edition, 1880.

**The  
Person:  
John  
(‘Honest  
Jack’)  
Parsons**

And so now we turn to the person. John Parsons was born in Portsmouth on 7 October 1791. He came from a family of seafarers. In 1849, his entry in O’Byrne’s *A Naval Biographical Dictionary* states that he had two brothers in the Royal Navy, Lt William Parsons and George Parsons, a Master.<sup>34</sup> He had an uncle who was a retired Royal Navy commander and a cousin, Capt. Sam Hellard, RN. He also had two other relatives serving the navy, an uncle and a cousin, the former of whom was killed at the Battle of Trafalgar.<sup>35</sup> Parsons entered the Navy as a ‘young gentleman intended for the sea service,’<sup>36</sup> aged 11 years on 29 May 1803.<sup>37</sup>

John Parsons’s early life was full of incident and excitement, as well as hardship. As a 13 year old, he saw action at Cape Finisterre in July 1805, aboard the *Defiance*, which was part of the fleet commanded by Vice Admiral Robert Calder, who was later court-martialled and charged with failing to assure a complete victory.<sup>38</sup> Following Calder’s recall to England, Parsons remained aboard the *Defiance* and, as a seasoned 14 year old (!) saw action at Trafalgar.<sup>39</sup> On 22 October 1805, the day after the battle, Parsons was rated midshipman and joined the *Gladiator* under Sir Isaac Coffin. In July 1808, he joined the *Podargus* under Captain William Hellard,<sup>40</sup> where he became a Master’s Mate. In September 1808 he was present at the surrender of the Russian squadron to Admiral Sir Charles Cotton at the Tagus River during the Peninsular War.<sup>41</sup>

The *Podargus* transported defeated French troops back to their home country. On 15 August 1809, while positioned off the French coast, Parsons was tasked with conveying documents ashore. Unfortunately he was captured by the French army, chained and marched to Havre-de-Grace. He spent three months in a French dungeon on a bread and water diet and under threat of execution. However, being just 18 years old, he was pardoned from execution and sent, still in chains, to Arras. He attempted escape and was therefore confined for a further four months in gaol. Later he was transferred to Verdun. A little over four years after first being captured, on Christmas day 1813, he finally succeeded in escaping: ‘in the course whereof; concealed in a cart under a heap of crockery ware, he passed through the centre of the French army on its road to Russia.’<sup>42</sup> He then spent approximately four months making his way through

<sup>34</sup> Capt. George Parsons later entered service with the Royal West India Mail Company, one of several private shipping firms which were awarded mail contracts. *Hampshire Advertiser*, 5 Oct and 19<sup>th</sup> Oct 1844. Special thanks to Tony Pawlyn of the National Maritime Museum Cornwall for finding and sharing this reference. See also Freda Harcourt, ‘British Oceanic Mail Contracts in the Age of Steam, 1838-1914,’ *Journal of Transport History*, Third series, vol. 9 (1988), pp. 1-18.

<sup>35</sup> William R. O’Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary, 1823-1896*, (London: J. Murray, 1849), p. 867.

<https://archive.org/stream/cu31924027921372#page/n879/mode/2up>. Accessed 15 August 2014.

See below for further information on the other cousin

<sup>36</sup> Dudley Pope, *Life in Nelson’s Navy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1996), p. 65. Available at

<http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015000701436;view=1up;seq=85>. Accessed 31 August 2014.

<sup>37</sup> O’Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, p. 867.

<sup>38</sup> *The Naval Chronicle for 1806, Vol XV* (London: Joyce Gold, 1806), p. 79 & p. 162.

<http://www.historicnavalfiction.com/general-hnf-info/naval-facts/the-naval-chronicle>. Accessed 27 October 2014.

<sup>39</sup> *The Trafalgar Roll*, 21st October 1805. <http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/Trafalgar/TR-PAGEtoSAYE.txt> Accessed 12 April 2014.

<sup>40</sup> The second cousin is not named by O’Byrne, but is very probably William Hellard since he stood as bondsman for the marriage of Parsons’s other cousin, Samuel Hellard, to Anne Barnes on 2 November 1814. See William J. C. Moens (ed.), *Hampshire Allegations for Marriage Licences Granted by the Bishop of Winchester 1689-1847, Volume 1* (London: The Harleian Society, 1893), p. 368. <https://archive.org/stream/hampshireallega02wincgoog#page/n394/mode/2up>. Accessed 22 August 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Edward Baines, *History of the Wars of the French Revolution, Volume 2* (New York: Bangs, Brother & Co., 1855), p. 68. The Russian Squadron was moored off the River Tagus under the command of Russian Vice-Admiral Seniavin, which was allied with Napoleon’s forces. Consequently, the Tagus was blockaded by the Royal Navy for ten months until the French commander, General Junot, surrendered to the British under the Convention of Cintra.

<sup>42</sup> O’Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, p. 867; See also John Hopkinson, ‘Register of Fellow Prisoners, Compiled During his Imprisonment between 1804 and 1814’ in Thomas J. Walker (ed.), *The Depot for Prisoners of War at Norman Cross Huntingdonshire 1796 to 1816* (London: Constable & Co., 1913), Appendix H, p. 312.

<http://scans.library.utoronto.ca/pdf/2/3/depotforprisoner00walkuoft/depotforprisoner00walkuoft.pdf>.

Hopkinson identifies two prisoners as being captured on 15 August 1809. They are John Parsons, identified as a Master’s Mate, and Henry Taylor, the Master of the *Podargus*. It appears likely that both were appointed to the task of delivering

Belgium and Holland, eventually arriving at South Beveland in Holland. Once again, he was taken prisoner, this time by the Dutch forces. However, at a time of fluctuating loyalties, Holland sided with the Prince of Orange whose forces were already allied to the British king. Parsons was therefore freed to complete his repatriation. In April 1814, at the age of 22, he resumed his naval service as Master's Mate on HMS *Wolverine*.<sup>43</sup>

Parsons then began a second phase of his maritime career in North America where, aboard the *Wolverine*, he was part of the British fleet involved in the Battle of Baltimore in September 1814. In December 1814 he transferred to HMS *Venerable*, stationed in the West Indies, serving Rear-Admiral Durham's fleet and was involved in an attack on an American schooner. He was promoted to lieutenant on 3 February 1815<sup>44</sup> aboard HMS *Crescent* until he was given command of a 720 ton Indiaman, the *Duke of Bedford*.<sup>45</sup> He was senior lieutenant on 5 January 1829 aboard the *Alligator* and then the *North Star* from 14 February 1831. He remained on the West Indies station until 1833 and then transferred to the Falmouth packet service awaiting his first appointment as a Packet commander.<sup>46</sup>

### The First Packet Ship: The *Seagull*

By now Parsons was an experienced seaman in his early 40's and 1834 was a particularly auspicious year. At the age of 42, in February of that year, he married Anne Rebecca Read,<sup>47</sup> nineteen years his junior, living at the time in Southsea near Parsons's own birthplace of Portsmouth. And to add to his contentment, on 6 June 1834 he began his Falmouth posting as Lieutenant-Commander of the packet ship *Seagull*.<sup>48</sup>

The earliest record of John Parsons's home in Falmouth is in the 1841 census<sup>49</sup> which shows his wife, her mother and sister along with two servants living in the Greenbank area of Falmouth at Stratton Place. Parsons is not mentioned so was probably at sea at the time. His next recorded address is Arwenack House, in 1847,<sup>50</sup> when he was appointed to his second packet command, with which we will deal later.

*Seagull* was launched at Chatham on 21 November 1831. She was a six-gunned schooner of 279 tons. She is famous for making the last ever packet voyage, returning to Falmouth on April 28 1851:

On Wednesday morning ... the *Seagull* ... arrived from Rio Janeiro, 47 days passage. ... This is the last vessel on this station as a packet, and with her this old and valuable station ceases to be the starting point of Her Majesty's mails, at least

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documents to the French mainland and captured together. In addition, with respect to Parsons's escape from Verdun, there are two escapees identified by Hopkinson. One is Parsons and the other is Joseph O'Brien, a midshipman from the *Minotaur*. Interestingly, the latter must have been one of the survivors of the wreck of the *Minotaur* on 22 December 1810, which tragedy is recorded in J M W Turner's 1810 painting *The Shipwreck of the Minotaur*. (For further information on the *Minotaur*, see William O. S. Gilly, *Narratives of Shipwrecks of the Royal Navy between 1793 and 1849, compiled principally from official documents in the Admiralty* (London: John W Parker, 1850), available at: [https://ia600604.us.archive.org/35/items/cihm\\_49203/cihm\\_49203.pdf](https://ia600604.us.archive.org/35/items/cihm_49203/cihm_49203.pdf)).

O'Brien is listed as being captured on 23rd Dec. 1810, which is consistent with the facts. Both he and John Parsons escaped on 24 December 1813, according to Hopkinson, rather than 25 December mentioned in O'Byrne's account.

<sup>43</sup> O'Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, p 867; Hopkinson, 'Register of Fellow Prisoners', p. 312.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Benyon, *Index of 19th Century Naval Vessels and a Few of their Movements* <http://www.pbenyon.plus.com/Nbd/exec/Index.html>. Accessed 12 April 2014.

<sup>45</sup> O'Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, relates that Parsons had command of this vessel for 'upwards of two years', (p. 867). However, there is no information on how and why this came to be.

<sup>46</sup> O'Byrne, *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, p. 867.

<sup>47</sup> *The United Service Journal and Naval and Military Magazine*, Part One (London: Henry Colburn, 1834), p. 574.

<sup>48</sup> The Admiralty. *The Navy List, Corrected to 20<sup>th</sup> March 1835*, (London: John Murray, 1835), p. 85.

[http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=AxEYAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA85&dq=%22john+parsons%22+r.n.&hl=en&sa=X&ei=Hg31U6H9E8Ov7AbNkIAY&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q=%22john%20parsons%22%20r.n.&f=false](http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=AxEYAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA85&dq=%22john+parsons%22+r.n.&hl=en&sa=X&ei=Hg31U6H9E8Ov7AbNkIAY&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=%22john%20parsons%22%20r.n.&f=false) Accessed 12 June 2014.

<sup>49</sup> *1841 Census by Hundreds*. <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~kayhin/cocp.html> Accessed 3 January 2014.

<sup>50</sup> *The West Briton*, Friday 2 July 1847. Cornish Studies Library (hereafter CSL) microfiche. Accessed. 28 July 2014.

for the present.<sup>51</sup>

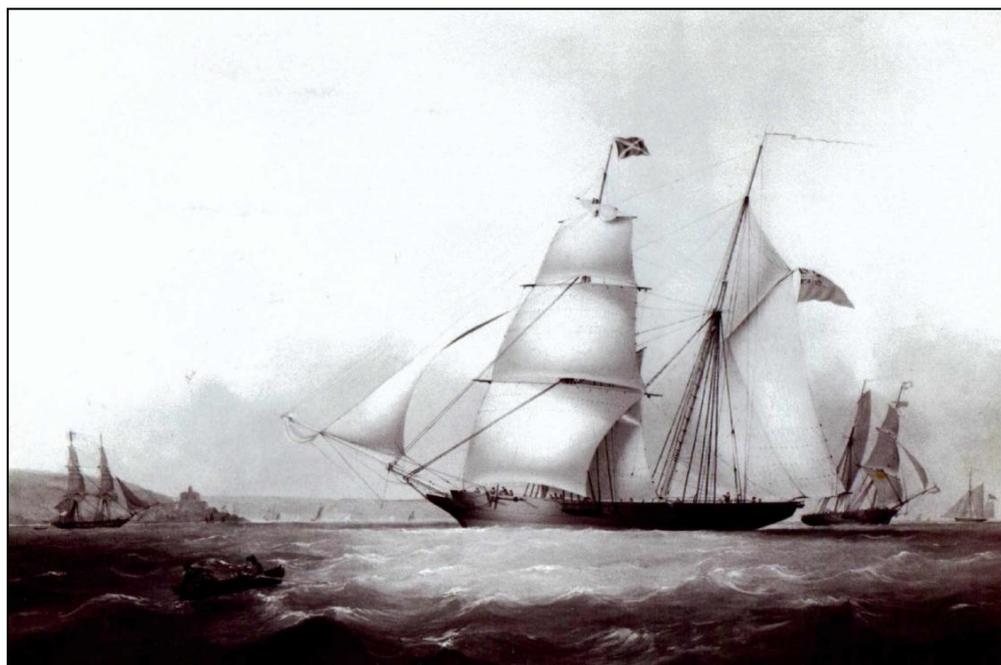


Figure 4: The Packet Ship *Seagull*. Artist: Nicholas Condy the Younger.  
Source: By permission Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society Local History Group.<sup>52</sup>

Daily routine aboard ship ranged from mundane to spectacular: ‘Falmouth 9 May 1835 arrived with mails from Mexico, have sailed from Belize on 4 Mar, Tampico (17th), Vera Cruz (28th), and Havannah (12 Apr)’.<sup>53</sup> In a letter dated 18 September 1837, addressed to Admiral Sir P. H. Durham, his former commander in the West Indies, and now Commander-in-Chief at Portsmouth, Parsons describes the experience of being caught in a hurricane off the Bahamas:

We arrived here on the 18th from Mexico and Havannah; we had the wind for twenty days from the east and east-north-east, with four days calm. In coming through the Gulf of Florida, and in the narrow part of the channel, on the night of the 30th July, I experienced a very heavy gale of wind from the north-west, which increased on the morning of the 31st, with thick weather, lightning, and rain in torrents. At about 10 A.M. we discovered discoloured water on the lee-beam, having had no observation on the 30th. At this time the wind was west, which made the Bahama bank (where I judged we were) a lee-shore; and in carrying a press of sail to clear it, all of them were split and blown out of the bolt-ropes: I was therefore under necessity of anchoring in five fathoms water; and by the time I had veered out 100 fathoms of chain, the vessel's stern was in 4½ fathoms. I did not let go the other anchor, fearing she might founder, as the sea was making a fair breach, and rolling aft to the wheel on the quarter-deck; and if we parted, we had still a chance of getting into the Old Bahama Channel. With great difficulty we tried to get another jib and trysail bent... On the morning of the 1st August the

<sup>51</sup> Pawlyn, *The Falmouth Packets*, p. 122.

<sup>52</sup> The illustration is from the archives of the Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society Local History Group. It is painted by marine artist Nicholas Matthew Condy (Nicholas Condy the Younger, 1816-1851, who was a member of the RCPS during the nineteenth century). Interestingly, the *Seagull* entered Falmouth for the last time on 28 April 1851, and Condy the Younger died on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1851, so the painting of the last packet ship was very likely his last work.

<sup>53</sup> Benyon, *Index of 19th Century Naval Vessels*, <http://www.pbenyon.plus.com/18-1900/S/04181.html>. Accessed 4 May 2014.

wind increased, and blew a perfect hurricane for about four hours, when it moderated a little, and veered to the south-west, which enabled us to bend another topsail. At noon we began to weigh, and in three hours we were able to make sail off the reef... The part of the bank on which I suppose we anchored is lat. 24° 40' north, long. 79° 8' west, and twelve miles south of Orange Keys. (Signed) J. PARSONS.<sup>54</sup>

As a result of this account, he achieved recognition from his military peers and was mentioned in Colonel Reid's *The Law of Storms* and Lt Edward Jennings's *Hints on Sea-Risks*.<sup>55</sup> In the latter manual, Jennings cites Parsons's action in the 1837 hurricane as a paradigm of seamanship, showing:

... what may be done by sound judgement, prompt decision, and good seamanship ..... Lieut. Parson's (*sic*) skill and conduct upon this occasion most probably saved the vessel and crew. He was not however content with this, but would not even leave his anchor and a few fathoms of chain behind him, but hove it up in a heavy swell and sea, as if he had been going out of harbour. Many persons would have slipped, in order to get sea-room from the reef as soon as possible.<sup>56</sup>

John Parsons gained a reputation for dependability and the nickname 'Honest Jack Parsons', as reflected in the following excerpts from the *Falmouth Packet* newspaper, dated 1 February 1840 and 11 March 1840:

For the last three weeks we have had a succession of heavy gales from W. to W.S.W., which have caused several vessels to put into our harbour, and which must have been severely felt at sea. The *Swift* packet, Lieut. Welch, which sailed hence for Halifax on the 4<sup>th</sup> ult., returned on Sunday last in a distressed condition. On the 19<sup>th</sup> she was hove on her beam ends by a terrific sea which carried away her main yard in two pieces, shifted several pigs of her ballast, and broke everything adrift below, smashing all the cabin furniture. The bulwarks on both sides of the upper deck were carried away, and seven men were washed overboard, but fortunately six out of the seven got on board again. The *Seagull*, Lieut. Parsons, was immediately ordered to take the *Swift*'s mail, with which she sailed on Monday afternoon.<sup>57</sup>

These events apparently caused some disquiet amongst the local population concerned for the welfare of sailors. In particular, Rev. Coope, Rector of King Charles' Church, and the wealthy landowner of Gyllingdune Manor in Falmouth, railed against the perceived 'needless hardship and extreme severity to which Lieut. Parsons' was exposed and the 'harass, annoyance and grievance' towards sailors perpetrated in particular by the Packet superintendent of the time, Capt. Plumridge. 'Parson Coope's Journal' further stated that the voyage assigned to Lt Parsons and his crew was '... an awful and too often fatal voyage ... the crew having to face the frightful rigours of a Northern winter' and 'compelled to sail with a contrary wind'.<sup>58</sup>

This rather squeamish reaction did not go down well with the editor of the *Falmouth Packet* newspaper, who, in an editorial, rejoined rather colourfully: 'We had almost a mind to leave the cowardly concoctors of this precious list of dastardly excuses to be answered in person by honest Jack Parsons himself on his return ...'; but obviously decided against this when he continues:

... Is there a sailor in the British Navy who would shelter himself under the flimsy

<sup>54</sup> Lt. Colonel W. Reid, *An Attempt to Develop the Law of Storms by Means of Facts Arranged According to Place and Time* (London: John Weale, 1838), p. 51. <https://archive.org/stream/attempttodevelop00reiduoft/page/50/mode/2up>. Accessed 14 August 2014

<sup>55</sup> Edward Jennings, *Hints on Sea Risks* (London: R. B. Bate, 1843), pp. 19-20.

<sup>56</sup> Jennings, *Hints on Sea Risks*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>57</sup> *The Falmouth Packet and Cornish Herald*, 1 February 1840, p.8. CSL microfilm. Accessed 28 July 2014.

<sup>58</sup> *The Falmouth Packet and Cornish Herald*, 14 March 1840, p.8. News from 11 March 1840, headed: "Captain Plumridge and the Packet Service". CSL microfilm. Accessed 28 July 2014.

and unmanly protection of such a pretence - 'the frightful rigours of a Northern winter!' Spirits of Hudson and Frobisher, and Davis! Are you extinct in British hearts? The spirits of Ross and Perry, and of hundreds of living and gallant hearts reply in thunder NO. 'The rigours of a northern winter!' Have the cowardly scoundrels who have compiled this paragraph – possibly with a view to the ruin of Lieut. Parsons, by the wish to exhibit him as a whining hypocrite, or an emaciated guitar player – ever contemplated the possible DANGERS, contingencies, and glories of a 'naval action' or asked themselves whether any living man with red blood flowing in his veins would not with bounding heart gladly expose himself to all the accumulated DANGERS of Trafalgar to share in its immortal glories?<sup>59</sup>

Thankfully Parsons proved himself to be no 'emaciated guitar player' but, once again, a fine sailor. He and his crew survived the demands of the voyage, vindicating the editor's contemptuous stance.

Parsons remained in command of the *Seagull* until 15 March 1842 and then purportedly went on to half pay awaiting his next ship. However, a further example of Parsons's sailing prowess predates his next command and is recorded in the *West Briton* newspaper, dated 23 April 1847:

THE QUICKEST VOYAGE EVER MADE TO RIO DE JANEIRO FROM FALMOUTH - Her Majesty's packet brigantine "Seagull," under the command of Lieut. J. PARSONS, sailed from Falmouth on the 6th of December last; arrived at Madeira on the 13th; sailed thence on the 14th; touched at Teneriffe and delivered the mails on the 16th; arrived at Pernambuco on the 30th; sailed on the 1st of January for Bahia, where she arrived on the 4th, and sailed again on the 5th for Rio de Janeiro, where she arrived on the morning of the 13th, and delivered the mails; having performed the voyage, including all stoppages, in thirty seven days twenty one hours. This is considered the shortest voyage out to Rio Janeiro ever performed by any packet in her Majesty's service touching at the northern ports.<sup>60</sup>

So, it appears that before being commissioned with command of the *Crane*, and a time when he was technically on half pay, Parsons made one further voyage aboard the *Seagull*; although why she was not under the command of Lt Henry Dicken, who took over on 8 April 1845,<sup>61</sup> is unclear.

### The Second Packet Ship: The Crane

On 28 June 1847 John Parsons became commander of the *Crane*, a larger 359 ton packet brig, launched 28 May 1839 'in the place of Lieut Lewis, whose time has expired'.<sup>62</sup> The *Crane* carried mails to and from the 'Brazils' and, along with other packet ships, was an important source of news from abroad. For example:

5 July 1850, Friday, FALMOUTH - On Sunday last, arrived H.M. sailing packet, "Crane" Lieut PARSONS, commander, with mails and passengers, from Brazils and Rio Janeiro. Her reports of the prevailing sickness in Rio is of the most alarming character. It had subsided for a short period, but has again broken out with all its former virulence. It is computed that the number of deaths in the city of Rio alone, by the fever, amounts to seventeen thousand. The church-yards are all filled with dead bodies, and now they are burying them in ditches. There were eight vessels lying in the port at the date of the packet's leaving, whose captains had died from fever, consequently they could not leave for want of navigators. The

<sup>59</sup> *The Falmouth Packet and Cornish Herald*. Accessed 28 July 2014.

<sup>60</sup> *The West Briton*, Friday 23 April 1847. CSL microfiche. Accessed 28 July 2014.

<sup>61</sup> The Admiralty, *The Navy List, Corrected to 20<sup>th</sup> December 1847* (London: John Murray, 1848), p. 43. Available at: [http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=reUNAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=navy+list&hl=en&ei=djfrTNbVGJHtOY3j8JEM&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=book-preview-link&resnum=17&ved=0CH8QuwUwEA#v=onepage&q=Henry%20Dicken&f=false](http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=reUNAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=navy+list&hl=en&ei=djfrTNbVGJHtOY3j8JEM&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=book-preview-link&resnum=17&ved=0CH8QuwUwEA#v=onepage&q=Henry%20Dicken&f=false), Accessed 1 September 2014.

<sup>62</sup> The Admiralty, *The Navy List, Corrected to 20<sup>th</sup> June 1847* (London: John Murray, 1847), p. 34.

<http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015025976468;view=1up;seq=298>. Accessed 14 August 2014.

packet lost her surgeon and one passenger, a female, on her passage home, by death.<sup>63</sup>

A model of the *Crane* is displayed in the National Maritime Museum Cornwall:

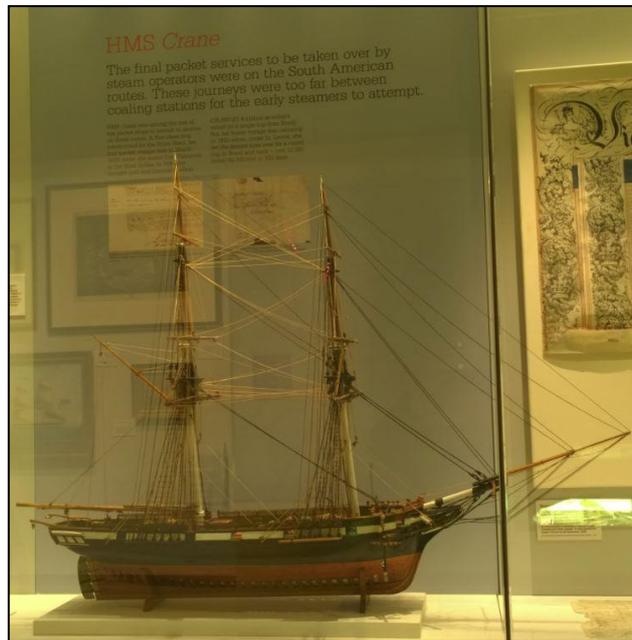


Figure 5: Model of H M Packet Brig *Crane* held at the National Maritime Museum Cornwall.

Source: Photo: Author's collection by permission.

An artefact, dated 1849, crafted by one of Commander Parsons's crew, shows the ship in full sail:



Figure 6: A Large Sailor's Woolwork of H.B.M. Packet *Crane*, with a date of 1849 and the Initials of the maker.

Source: © Earle D. Vandekar of Knightsbridge, Inc., New York, by permission.  
<http://www.vandekar.com/archives/details.asp?inventoryNumber=NY07316>.

The *Crane* was 'paid off' on 11 January 1851. John Parsons, now aged 59 years, went

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<sup>63</sup>*The West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser*, Friday 12 July 1850. CSL microfilm. Accessed 4 September 2014.

on to half-pay with no record of any further active service.<sup>64</sup> Following naval tradition at that time, a half-pay officer retained his rank but not his command. This is reflected in the census of 1851, taken on the night of the 30/31 March, which states:

Wood Lane Terrace, John Parsons, Head, M, 59, Lieut Rn (Half Pay), Portsmouth Hampshire, Anne R Parsons, Wife, M, 40, Lady, Lambeth London, Ellen F D Parsons, Dau, 9, Scholar At Home, Falmouth Cornwall, Mary Read, Ma-Law, W, 77, Annuitant, Newport Isle of Wight, Frances Read, Dau, U, 38, Annuitant, Lambeth London, Susan R Trip, Servnt, U, 25, General Servant, St Keverne Cornwall.<sup>65</sup>

After a full and active naval career, John Parsons retired from the Royal Navy on 9 January 1854 with the rank of commander.<sup>66</sup> And so we trace his progress over more than half a century, from an 11 year old ‘young gentleman intended for the sea service’ to a 14 year old midshipman, an 18 year old master’s mate, a 24 year old lieutenant and a 63 year old commander. He had spent 52 years in the Navy, 28 of which were at sea in incommensurate conditions. His journey had been long and varied with more than a little hardship along the way. He had certainly earned his retirement and the respect of his peers. Bearing in mind that he died in 1864 we must hope he also had time at home to enjoy his family and the fruits of his long years of service.

### The House: Tresilian, Woodlane

Finally, then, we turn to John Parsons’s house, Tresilian. Despite all the demands of commanding a sailing vessel in these turbulent times, Parsons did not neglect his family’s material needs. Five years before his retirement, in February 1849, he bought a plot of land located at the end of Woodlane: ‘... for and in consideration of the sum of Four hundred pounds of lawful money of Great Britain ...’ he purchased the area now occupied by Tresilian and its neighbour Hillside. He acquired from Raikes Currie, M.P., George Wodehouse Currie and John Henry Gurney

... (a)ll those two several plots of ground situate on the South side of Woodlane ... containing by admeasurement two roods thirty two poles and one fifth of a pole or thereabouts heretofore part of a field late in the occupation of John Edey together with the dwelling houses and all other buildings and erections thereupon lately erected and built by the said John Parsons.<sup>67</sup>

The ground plan shows a plot with Woodlane to the northwest boundary, occupied by two attached dwellings. To the southeast and southwest are the boundaries with Lord Woodhouse’s ground and the northeast wall abuts Captain Porteous’s tenement. (Also, note the zigzag wall at the northeastern boundary: interesting and inexplicable!)

<sup>64</sup> Benyon. *Index of 19th Century Naval Vessels*, <http://www.pbenyon.plus.com/18-1900/C/01174.html> and *Naval Ships of the World’s Navies*, <http://www.worldnavalships.com/directory/builder.php?BuilderID=90>. Both accessed 15 August 2014; *London Standard*, Saturday, 11 January 1851, p. 3. “Crane, packet-brig, Lieut. Commander Parsons, is to be paid off on the 17<sup>th</sup>, at Devonport”. <http://newspaperarchive.com/uk/middlesex/london/london-standard/1851/01-11/page-3>. Accessed 15 August 2014.

<sup>65</sup> *Cornwall Online Census Project*—1851 Transcript of Piece HO107/1911 (Part 5) Enumeration District 1f Civil Parish of Falmouth, Eccl. Parish of - Folio 318, p. 31. <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~kayhin/51911d.html>. Accessed 15 August 2014. It is interesting to compare this with the earlier 1841 census in which two servants are recorded: perhaps a reflection of the constraints of half-pay?

<sup>66</sup> The Admiralty, *The Navy List, Corrected to 20<sup>th</sup> June 1856*, p. 82.

<sup>67</sup> *Deed of conveyance*, 27 February 1849. Author’s collection.

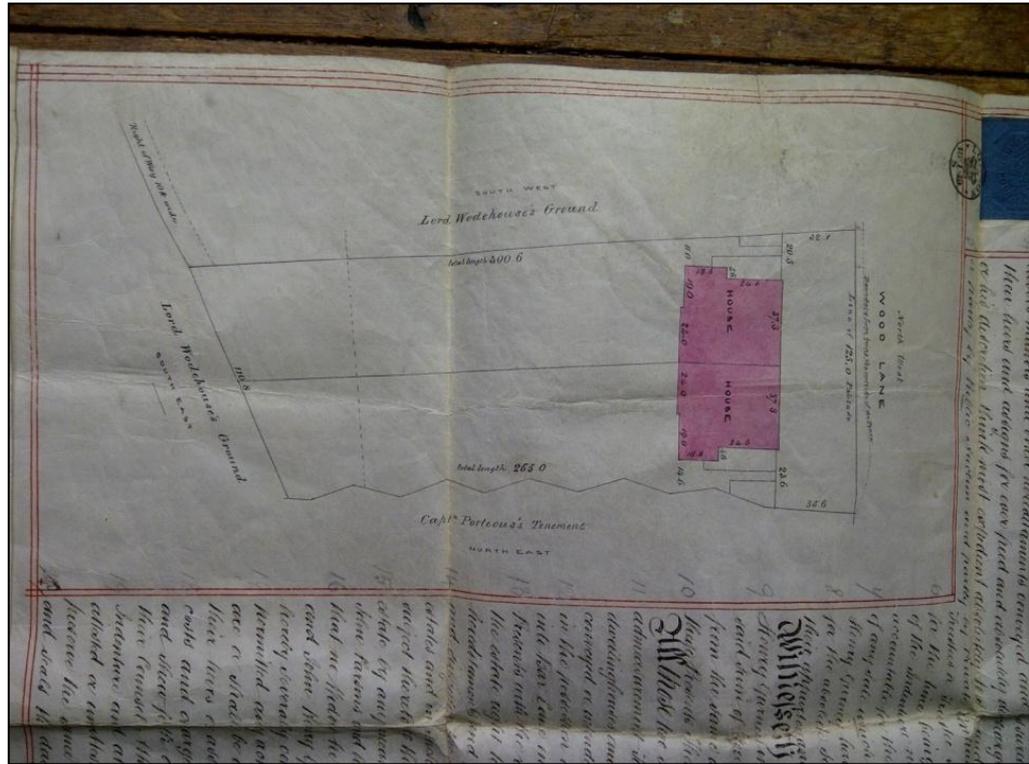


Figure 7: Deed of conveyance, 27 February, 1849. ‘Now this indenture witnesseth that for and in consideration of the sum of Four hundred pounds of lawful money of Great Britain ... (ownership of the land and property shown above was granted to) ... John Parsons of Falmouth in the County of Cornwall’.

Source: Author’s collection.

In 1849, Parsons would have been in his 58<sup>th</sup> year and approaching the age when retirement was imminent, so it seems probable that the house was part of a retirement plan. He also bought the plots both for Tresilian and its semi-detached neighbour, Hillside. This too may have been a deliberate plan to assure an income either from leasing the next-door property or selling it.

Tresilian itself is early Victorian, but essentially Georgian in design. It is modest compared with some of the grand houses on and around Woodlane (see earlier O.S. Map), such as Woodlane House, which originally belonged to Falmouth’s collector of customs, Samuel Humphrey Pellew, older brother of Captain Edward Pellew<sup>68</sup> and those belonging to the Fox family, owners of the most prominent Falmouth shipping agency. They lived further along Woodlane at Kerris Vean, Rosehill and Grove Hill House.

Tresilian has a south-east facing garden leading to the stables and, at that time, a clear view of Falmouth Bay. It still retains many original features, including fine mahogany doors on the ground floor. It is possible that Parsons would have brought the mahogany back from one of his Brazil voyages. Perhaps, indeed, off-cuts of the same mahogany were used to fashion his sea chest pictured below.

<sup>68</sup> Gay, *Old Falmouth*, p. 132.



Figure 8: “An early 19th-century mahogany brass-bound campaign chest for Captain John Parsons RN with fitted baize-lined compartmentalised plate tray within hinged lid with brass plate engraved J. Parsons RN”.  
© Charles Miller Ltd, by permission.

Source: <http://www.charlesmillerltd.com/Catalogues/ms010513/page002.html>.  
<http://www.charlesmillerltd.com/Catalogues/ms010513/lot0069.html>.

There is an attic which originally contained servants' quarters and cellars with a wine store and a slate sink where vegetables from the greenhouse would have been prepared. Outside there are a number of small outhouses, including a meat store and a room with a central drain for washing clothes. The garden is well planted with some large trees that could date from Parsons's time. All of which gives an idea of the sort of home a person of his standing would have expected – a modest home with aspirations, for a Naval Officer who, while of modest rank and income, was known and respected by his peers as 'Honest Jack Parsons'.



Figure 9: Tresilian, rear view.  
Source: Photo: Steve Earle-Davis, by permission

**Conclusion** The history of every community depends on its inhabitants. The naval community, the packet ship establishment, the port, its traders and workers, the wives, children and relatives— all in their own way, small or large, shaped the community in which they lived and worked and created the landscape and spirit of the place. Would Falmouth have been the same without the packet service? Certainly not: there was a reciprocal relationship so that, for example, the domestic needs of packet commanders and crew created a demand on the infrastructure of Falmouth which, in turn, nurtured and allowed the service to flourish. This reciprocal relationship is personified by John Parsons. Would Falmouth and the packet service have been the same without him? If he had failed to navigate the 1837 hurricane, how many families in Falmouth would have mourned a parent, a spouse, a child? Indeed, which children might not have been born? And would Woodlane be the street we now recognise if John Parsons had chosen to build his house elsewhere: a different house where Tresilian now stands, different occupants, a different narrative?

So, this is the story of John Parsons and his Falmouth home, Tresilian. My aim has been to go beyond the usual account of seafaring exploits to offer an insight into the balance provided by the domestic arrangements associated with a packet commander and to show how his life encompassed not just naval duties but also family responsibilities. Commander John Parsons RN lived a life full of incident and adventure, surviving war, pestilence and tempest. He served as a model officer and seaman in the Royal Navy and packet service. He also provided for his family and contributed to the domestic fabric of the town. And then, like the packet service itself, he faded away. Lost in the shadows of time, but not sunk without trace. In today’s world of ‘emaciated guitar players,’ he may seem heroic, but in his time he was simply doing his duty and the traces of his life add to the great history of Falmouth, the Royal Navy, and the packet service.

The house remained under the ownership of John Parsons until his death on 31 March 1864.<sup>69</sup> His wife Anne died on 24 Feb 1865 and the house was inherited by Frances Read, Anne’s sister. John Parsons, his wife and daughter are buried in Budock Church cemetery.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> I am grateful to Diane Donohue of *Cornwall Online Parish Clerks* (<http://www.cornwall-opc.org/index.htm>) who kindly sent me a photocopy of the record of burials in the parish of Budock for 1864. John Parsons’s details are on p. 82 of that record.

<sup>70</sup> *Cornwall Online Parish Clerk Database*, <http://www.cornwall-opc-database.org/search-database/more-info/?t=mis&id=63530>. Accessed 12 June 2014. Since writing this I have also learnt that sadly his daughter Eleanor died before her parents on 3 October 1861, aged 19 years (Budock Church burial record, p.3. Photocopy kindly provided by Diane Donohue of *Cornwall Online Parish Clerks* (<http://www.cornwall-opc.org/index.htm>)).

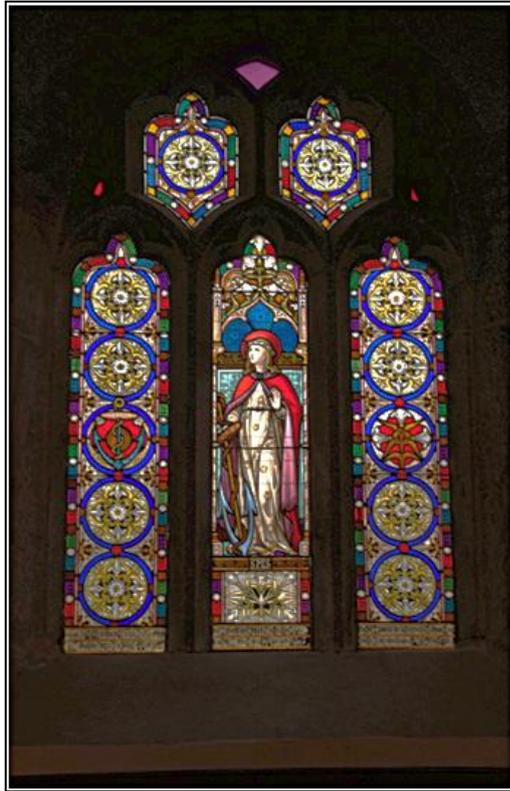


Figure 10: Window in Budock Church, North Wall. The left pane is dedicated to John Parsons, the middle to his wife and the right to his daughter.

Source: Photograph: author's collection



Figure 11: Inscription at bottom of John Parsons's pane: 'In Memory of Commander John Parsons R.N. Late of Woodlane, Falmouth, Who Died There on 31st March 1864'.

Source: Photograph: author's collection

Frances Read put Tresilian up for auction on 10 April 1865, at the Albion Hotel in Falmouth (now the Cutty Sark Public House), where it was purchased by William Broad for £1465.00.

William Broad worked in the family shipping agency as a merchant and Lloyd's Agent. He later inherited the family business and was a vice consul for Austria, Hungary and Holland. The firm's offices, Broad & Sons were at 14 Arwenack Street, Falmouth (now the Royal British Legion Club).<sup>71</sup> One of his children, who succeeded him as the owner of Tresilian, was Herman Usticke Broad, whose daughter, Eveline Mary, married into the nobility. For reasons that are not clear, Herman Usticke later changed his birth name to his mother's maiden name of Pender. But that is another story. Here this brief account ends.

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<sup>71</sup> R. A. Sampson, (ed). *Post Office Directory of Falmouth and Neighbourhood* (Falmouth: Lake and Co., 1892), p. 2. Available at: <http://specialcollections.le.ac.uk/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p16445coll4/id/64265/rec/14>. Accessed 15 June 2014