

TROZE

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# Letters from a Lovelorn Captain

*By Jonathan Varcoe*

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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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### **Jonathan Varcoe**

Jonathan Varcoe was born in Cornwall where his family has been associated with china clay from its beginnings. (The name Varcoe was only found in mid Cornwall). He became a chorister at Canterbury and an organ scholar at Oxford before going into education. Latterly he was Director of Music at St Pauls' School, London. Now retired, he enjoys composing, and writing about music and maritime topics. He lives in Salisbury with his wife and makes regular visits to Cornwall.

# Letters from a Lovelorn Captain

*Jonathan Varcoe*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In the busy years of the nineteenth century the rapid expansion of Britain's industry and empire required greater supplies of essential minerals. Work opportunities increased and coastal communities grew as people moved into the mining areas and ports to service the growth.<sup>2</sup> Ships came and went carrying bulky low cost but essential cargoes such as coal and china clay, the latter constituting a major trade destined for the Staffordshire potteries including Spode and Wedgwood, among others. The St Austell region was the major source of china clay in Cornwall and the ports of Fowey, Par, Charlestown and Pentewan were the main outlets in the nineteenth century; the last three were purpose-built clay ports.<sup>3</sup> There was a constant flow of ships and men in and out of these ports and several historians have considered aspects of this peripatetic life from conditions on shore to conditions at sea.<sup>4</sup> The welfare of sailors has been examined as well as their educational and spiritual needs.<sup>5</sup> This article looks at the coastal trade from a personal perspective, by following the experience of one master mariner and his attempt to form a relationship with a young lady from the small china clay port of Pentewan in 1848.

## Pentewan and the development of the china clay ports

The port of Pentewan, where the romance between Captain David Jenkins and Miss Eliza Ann Varcoe began, was originally built by Sir Christopher Hawkins. The Hawkins family seat was located at Trewithen near Probus, where they held 'extensive estates and several mines'.<sup>6</sup> Because of Hawkins's interest in the china clay he needed a site on the coast from which to export the clay and other minerals from his mines.

The only existing harbour close enough to the clay pits, situated on the high ground beyond St Austell, was that of Charlestown, developed by Charles Rashleigh during the 1790s. Charlestown was an important safe harbour for the china clay trade and it quickly became very congested. The development of a dock at Pentewan was an obvious answer with the added bonus of easy access down the valley from St Austell. As soon as the new dock opened in 1826, it also proved very popular for the shipment of tin ore which was being produced

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to extend a thank you to Dr Helen Doe who assisted in the preparation of this article.

<sup>2</sup> Helen Doe, 'The Long Reach of the Small Port: Influences and Connections in Small English Ports in Nineteenth Century' in Schulte Beerbuhl, M., (ed.), *Cosmopolitan Networks in Commerce and Society*, *GHIL Bulletin*, No 2, (London: German Historical Institute, 2011), pp. 133-50.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Kittridge, *Cornwall's Maritime Heritage* (Truro: Twelveheads, 1989), pp. 16-17; Kenneth Hudson, *The History of English China Clays: Fifty Years of Pioneering and Growth* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles 1968), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Conrad Dixon, 'Pound and Pint: Diet in the Merchant Service, 1750-1980,' in Palmer, Sarah and Williams, Glynn, (eds.), *Charted and Uncharted Waters: Proceedings of a Conference on the Study of British Maritime History, 8-11 September 1981, Queen Mary College, London*, (Greenwich: National Maritime Museum, 1981), pp. 164-180; Stephanie Jones, 'Blood Red Roses: The Supply of Merchant Seamen in the Nineteenth Century', *Mariner's Mirror*, 58 (1972), p. 429; David M. Williams, 'Mid-Victorian Attitudes to Seamen and Maritime Reform: the Society for Improving the Condition of Merchant Seamen, 1867', *International Journal of Maritime History* III, no.1 (1991), p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> Alston Kennerley, 'Seamen's Missions and Seaman's Homes' in Fisher, Stephen, (ed.), *Studies in British Privateering, Trading Enterprise and Seamen's Welfare, 1775-1900*, (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1987), pp.121-165; Alston Kennerley, 'Nationally Recognised Qualifications for British Merchant Navy Officers, 1865-1966', in *International Journal of Maritime History* Vol. XIII No. 1, (June, 2001), pp.115-136.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Jaggard, *Cornwall Politics in the Age of Reform*, (London: Boydell Press and the Royal Historical Society, 1999), pp. 50-54.

at the giant Polgooth mine less than two miles up the valley towards St Austell. It was also used for the import of goods such as limestone, coal, timber and much else needed by the thriving town of St Austell and for the mines nearby. The establishment of the new ports signified the expansion of the china clay trade which joined copper and tin as Cornwall's major exports.

Hawkins also conceived the idea of laying down a tramway to link St Austell with his new harbour. Completed in 1829, it made Pentewan even more attractive as a trading port. By 1831 this tiny port was handling one third of the county's clay exports.<sup>7</sup> By 1858, ten years after Captain Jenkins loaded his cargo at Pentewan, this port along with Charlestown shipped the major share of Cornish clay, with Pentewan shipping 14,000 tons.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 1: Pentewan harbour ca. 1912  
Source: Cornwall Centre, Redruth

With so much clay being shifted, increased shipping made the difficult entry into Pentewan. The ships that entered were not large by contemporary standards; the maximum measurement was 200 tons, which was typical of the trade. These ships were involved in both the coastal trade and the deep sea trade, shipping goods to foreign ports. For Pentewan this meant on occasion ships brought in coal and then reloaded with china clay. By 1876 the split for the china clay trade was 4,727 tons to British ports and 8,786 tons to foreign ports.<sup>9</sup> No wonder there were three pubs in such a small community as each ship had a crew who needed refreshment. The village also had an Anglican church and the Bible Christians (later Methodists) were already well established with a chapel in 1810 which also doubled as a fish cellar.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> A. Guthrie, *Cornwall in the Age of Steam*, (Padstow: Tabb House, 1994), p. 52.

<sup>8</sup> Robert E. Evans & Geoffrey W. Prettyman, *Pentewan in the Past* (Pentewan: Pentewan Publications, 1999), pp. 5-6.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Hudson, *The History of English China Clay: Fifty Years of Pioneering and Growth*, (Newton Abbot: David & Charles), p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> Evans & Prettyman, *Pentewan*, p. 35.

## The Letters

The development and growth of Pentewan attracted a population with an eye to bettering themselves. This included the family of Eliza Ann Varcoe, along with the Couchs, Kellows and Prettymans who moved to the tiny village.<sup>11</sup> A chance survival of a set of letters from Welsh sea captain David Jenkins gives us an idea of relationships among the families, the experiences of a coastal trader, and the strains that such an occupation had on a blossoming romance.<sup>12</sup> While it might be expected that deep sea trade with its long absences from home would cause problems, the coastal trade was also difficult. Economic pressures meant quick turnarounds in port were a priority and this gave limited time for people to get to know each other. The only hope of developing a romantic relationship was through letters and the promise of return visits.

Sometime in December 1847 a simple one-masted sloop, the *Heart of Oak*, registered in Beaumaris, Anglesey, North Wales, made her way up the coast to the buoy situated a short distance off the entrance of the channel leading to Pentewan dock. She was an elderly vessel, her lines not as sleek as younger ships.<sup>13</sup> Her captain was David Jenkins, in his mid-thirties, from Anglesey. During this or a previous stay in Pentewan Captain Jenkins met Eliza Ann Varcoe, but he was not in port long enough to further their acquaintance. After his departure in January 1848 he attempted to ignite a romance via correspondence as he sailed from port to port.

Sheltering in St Mary's Roads, Scilly, Jenkins took the opportunity to write.

*Scilly, Jan 18<sup>th</sup> 1848*

*To Miss E.A. Varcoe  
Near the Ship Inn  
Pentewan, Cornwall*

*Dear Friend,*

*According to my promise, I now make use of my pen in acquainting you where I am, and have been since the 12<sup>th</sup>.ult. It has been very contrary weather for us ever since we left Pentewan. I have nothing in particular to acquaint you of, but that I am in good condition of health at present, thank the Lord. And I hope these few lines will meet both you and your sister in the same state. Please give my kind respects to your sister and receive the same yourself. If you will favour me with a line or two I shall feel indebted to you. Direct to Capt. David Jenkins, 'Heart of Oak', Runcorn, Nr. Liverpool. The 'Andes' is here with us and 3 more bound for Liverpool. This is in haste from your well wisher and humble friend.*

*David Jenkins*

What does this brief first letter tell us? He was keen to improve his acquaintance with a lady he had met in Pentewan but he does not know her exact address. He was in the coastal trade on his way to Runcorn, the major receiving port on the River Mersey for Potteries-bound clay. The link with a Welsh-owned ship and the trade between Cornwall and Runcorn highlights the importance of obtaining return cargoes as these were crucial to profitability of shipping in the china clay trade. The Potteries district was close to readily

<sup>11</sup> Evans & Prettyman, *Pentewan*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>12</sup> The letters were discovered in 1966. My father, a keen stamp collector, was known to Mr Waters, who owned an antique shop in St Blazey. One day Mr Waters phoned my father and said he had something my father would find most interesting. It was an envelope containing some letters all addressed to Miss E. Varcoe, our family name. My father read the letters with increasing excitement for they were clearly a rare find. He asked Mr Waters where he had found this envelope to be told that it had come to light stuffed into the upholstered seat of an old chair that he was repairing.

<sup>13</sup> *Lloyd's Register*, 1848.

available supplies of coal. Because there was no indigenous coal in Cornwall, and given coal's importance in the nineteenth century as almost the sole source of heat, light and power, there was always a ready market. Coal might be for domestic hearths but it was also needed for gasworks. For instance, Thomas Stevens, an agent for and shipper of china clay from Pentewan and Charlestown in the 1850s and 1860s, was also retained to supply coal to Plymouth gasworks thus giving his ships a guaranteed return cargo.<sup>14</sup>

Profits in china clay were low and freight rates were never generous, thus overall the trade was not as profitable as the East coast coal trade.<sup>15</sup> Slate from north Wales was probably Jenkins's most frequent cargo. His hopes of regular visits to Pentewan and to Eliza Ann Varcoe were destined to be in the hands of his employers, the ship's managing owners.

### Eliza Ann Varcoe

Eliza Ann Varcoe was born in 1828, second child to Thomas and Margaret Varcoe of Pentewan. In 1839 Margaret died, leaving Thomas to bring up his eleven year old daughter with the help of his widow's parents John and Elizabeth Varcoe (Eliza Ann's mother's maiden name was also Varcoe) both of whom were in their seventies and lived at their son-in-law's house. Eliza Ann's brother John, three years older, may have left home. In view of his later occupation he was working as a ship's boy and apprentice seaman on a locally owned ship. He was granted his Master's Certificate in Swansea in January 1851 after having sailed for five years in both the foreign and coastal trades.<sup>16</sup>

Thomas Varcoe was clearly an important person in the village. He was described as coal merchant in the 1841 census but it is likely that he was also a general merchant. In 1848 Eliza Ann was running the household and looking after her father and her grandfather aged 86, now a widower. Three years later the census included Helen Geach, a cousin who is named as a student, aged 14.<sup>17</sup> By 1851 Thomas Varcoe was listed as a 'relieving agent',<sup>18</sup> a workhouse agent for St Austell assessing the poor for eligibility, and by 1861 he was a 'proprietor of land and houses'. He added shipping agent to his portfolio showing himself to be an astute and successful businessman.<sup>19</sup>

### The burgeoning romance

Captain Jenkins addressed his first letter to Eliza Ann in care of the Ship Inn, run by Timothy Sarah who was from an established Pentewan family. And, like Thomas Varcoe, Sarah quickly came into wealth by taking advantage of fresh opportunities offered in the burgeoning village with its new thriving dock. He, and his wife Maria who probably ran the Inn, had eight children. Their oldest daughter was Hannah Marie who worked as a barmaid in the Ship Inn.<sup>20</sup> She was one year older than Eliza Ann and she clearly had a role in the developing romance.

Was this the first letter Jenkins wrote to twenty-year-old Eliza Ann? It is certainly very stilted. He has made an acquaintance with her and with her 'sister'. However no sister exists in the census returns. Jenkins is possibly referring to Ellen (or Helen) Geach, Eliza's cousin. The *Andes* was mentioned because Eliza Ann would have known of the vessel as one which had recently visited Pentewan.

<sup>14</sup> John Armstrong, 'The Coastal Trade in Cornish China Clay' in Helen Doe, Alston Kennerley, Philip Payton (eds.), *Maritime History of Cornwall*, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, forthcoming 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Armstrong, 'The Coastal Trade in Cornish China Clay'.

<sup>16</sup> [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk), Master and Mates Certificates.

<sup>17</sup> [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk), Pentewan 1851 census.

<sup>18</sup> [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk), Pentewan 1841, 1851 and 1861 censuses.

<sup>19</sup> [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk), Pentewan 1861 census.

<sup>20</sup> [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk), Pentewan 1851 census.

Jenkins's second letter shows a marked change in tone from his first message, which tells us that he must have received a positive response.

**Liverpool, Feb 23<sup>rd</sup> 1848**

*Dear Madam,*

*It is with pleasure beyond description that I take my pen in hand to acquaint one on whom my future happiness depends of my safe arrival and that in good health on Saturday last and to my great satisfaction I had the pleasure of receiving a small sheet of paper and although there was no name attached to it I suspect it to have come from you my heart's adoration ... I find it dated Feb.1<sup>st</sup> and St Austle's postmark Feb.2<sup>nd</sup>. But at the same time nothing would give me greater pleasure than hearing from you my love. And if you will oblige me with a line or two from under your own hand please to direct to Capt. David Jenkins, 'Heart of Oak', at Messrs. Rigby's office Runcorn Near Liverpool and your humble admirer will await with pleasure.*

Perhaps, not surprisingly, Eliza was slightly alarmed by the marked ardour in his tone. At the foot a draft reply is written in pencil:

**Pentewan, February 25 1848**

*Sir,*

*... I was rather surprised at your expressions in your letter which I know not how to interpret the suddenness of your passion for an unworthy object like myself I can scarcely approve of, more especially as prudence and decorum forbid and yet I am unwilling to say anything of a harsh nature that have the least tendency to wound your feelings. I must add that I feel highly indebted by the preference you entertain and regard. You, sir, best know your own heart and if you are sincere and genuine which I will not doubt, will receive as you ought this frankness.*

*from, sir, your obedient servant,*

*E.A.Varcoe*

Duly warned, Jenkins's reply is a little less heated.

**Bangor, March 18<sup>th</sup> 1848**

*Dear E.A.*

*... You tell me that I rather surprised you by the suddenness of my passion I don't think, miss, but you are aware that passion is something like fire in all people who know what love is and how to appreciate its value. True all people do not show their passion as soon as others and if I have offended you by declaring mine, I trust you have goodness enough in store to forgive me ... I have nothing strange to acquaint you with, but I hope you will oblige me by answering these few lines, and in which I hope you will favour me with a decided answer whether you approve of my addresses or not. Pardon my bluntness of manner, this in haste from your humble and affectionate admirer.*

Eliza Ann decided to continue the correspondence and her draft reply is written on the other side of the letter:

**Pentewan, March 1848**

*Sir,*

*I should indeed be unworthy [of] the good opinion you entertain for me in not answering your letter and in order that you may not be deceived in that good opinion I have taken up the pen in reply thereto. I scorn to use the*

*common coquetry of our sex to keep you in suspense and I therefore candidly avow that you are not indifferent to me. This avowal somewhat unusual perhaps for a young female to make is drawn from me by the candour and frankness of your letter. I fear you will think me a strange bold girl in writing so freely to almost an entire stranger but the purity of my thoughts must plead my excuse...*

*E.A.Varcoe*

Judging by Jenkins's next letter that he wrote from Cork her gentle rebuke appears to have calmed down his forward behaviour. He also begins to share information about his experiences in the coastal trade.

**Cork, April 17 1848**

*Dear Friend,*

*I wish once more to acquaint you of my safe arrival here from Bangor, which place I left on the 8<sup>th</sup> inst. And got to the river here on the 14<sup>th</sup>, and I have the pleasure of stating that I enjoy good health, which I hope you do the same. Dear Miss Varco, I should dearly like for fortune to be allotted to me as to enjoy your company but as there is no likelihood of my coming to Pentewan now awhile, I hope you will favour me with a line from under your hand which believe will be heartily welcomed by me. I intend shortly to leave this my present situation as I do not think myself justified by being in such a dull sailing vessel. It was through such dullness of sailing I was so long detained last winter which I am aware gave me no credit. And provided I cannot get master of a vessel which I can make myself happy in, I shall sail as mate where I shall have less care and anxiety on my mind...*

Jenkins implies that his acquaintance with Pentewan and Eliza Ann may have begun earlier. Though the existing letters begin in January, they may have first met on a previous visit by the *Heart of Oak* to Pentewan. He refers with frustration to his 'dull sailing ship' and his wish to find another berth, perhaps one which would allow him more frequent visits.

**The Heart of Oak** The *Heart of Oak*, built in Ipswich in 1771 was indeed an elderly vessel at 77 years old.<sup>21</sup> She was not only a veteran but also a survivor in the hazardous occupation of the coastal trade.<sup>22</sup> Her majority owner was Edward Ellis, a shipbuilder of Bangor, who held 48 out of the total of 64 shares.<sup>23</sup> Ellis built many vessels for the coastal trade and was a man with strong Methodist connections.<sup>24</sup> In 1847 the other 16 shares were owned by John Jones, master of the vessel before David Jenkins. By 1848 Ellis owned 40 shares, William Williams, a mariner of Morfa Bychan, had 4 shares, and the remaining 20 shares were owned by three men from Portmadoc - a draper, a schoolmaster and a blacksmith. So David Jenkins did not actually own any shares in the ship. He had taken over as master from John Jones a few months before his visit to Pentewan.<sup>25</sup> As far as is known she was used largely for trading from Bangor to Derry during the 1848/49 period, though this is contradicted by the much wider ranging voyages she undertook during the time of Jenkins's correspondence with Eliza Ann in 1848. But it seems clear the ship was mostly employed in

<sup>21</sup> Caernarfon Record Office: Beaumaris Shipping Registers.

<sup>22</sup> *Clayton's Directory*, 1865.

<sup>23</sup> Caernarfon Record Office: Beaumaris Shipping Registers.

<sup>24</sup> Aled Aemes, *Ships and Seamen of Anglesey, 1558-1918: Studies in Maritime and Local History*, (Llangefni: Anglesey Antiquarian Society, 1973), pp. 216-7.

<sup>25</sup> Caernarfon Record Office: Beaumaris Shipping Registers.

trading typical cargoes from her local area of Bangor. In going further afield to Pentewan a return cargo of clay was a convenient revenue earner to get her back to North Wales.



Figure 2: *Troubadour*, a typical trading ketch, on the slip at Pentewan  
Source: Cornwall Centre Collection, Redruth

Jenkins's fourth letter also gives us an idea of the difficulties he and other master mariners encountered while in the coastal trade. The six days taken to sail from Bangor to Cork is not impressive. The six days taken to sail from Bangor to Cork is not impressive. A little more than 200 nautical miles in a more or less direct line, such distance could be covered in less than 48 hours given a favourable wind. However the weather was not kind in the spring of 1848 and much of the time was probably spent either sheltering from bad weather or from fog. High winds and gales disrupted shipping with reports of severe damage to ships large and small in the Channel in early March. The gales had subsided when the *Heart of Oak* set sail from Bangor to Cork, but serious fog had developed. The iron screw steamer *Senator* ran aground near Land's End in thick fog and became a total wreck.<sup>26</sup> Captain Jenkins does not give Eliza Ann any idea of the dramas of sailing a small vessel around the coast although she was well aware of them given her background.

## Romantic Complications

**Newport, May the 5<sup>th</sup> 1848**

*Dear E. Varcoe*

*Having sailed from Cork before your letter reached there it was enveloped and directed to Bangor and I have had the pleasure of receiving it this morning and proud I am to find that you enjoy your health as I do, thank the Lord. It is rather astonishing to me how some people foresake the common*

<sup>26</sup> *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 21 April 1848.

*rules of decorum such as Mrs Sarah and her daughter. But it is not anything to be a moment surprised about when in fact I have seen plenty of that conduct, which is very unbecoming, from the same party whilst I was at Pentewan, but I hope dear friend that you will endeavour to take as little notice of such like as possible. I arrived here last Saturday and will sail next Monday if not tomorrow morning for Liverpool ... You say my love that you would not remain if you were me in an uncomfortable situation. I would wish to procure another one before I leave the present, if I possibly can. If I thought I would get one at Pentewan I should instantly come there but I hope it will not be long before I shall be there to behold her upon whom my hopes are centred. You will excuse me for these sentiments of mine. I do not like much of it myself but I cannot help myself at times. If your brother is acquainted with our correspondence please to give my respects to him.*

*... You will most likely pardon me my love for desiring you to let me know the sentiments of your heart more fully in your next so as it will leave admittance for mine in return, for upon my credit I can scarcely believe I am writing to one I love whom I merely name friend at the commencing of my letters. Do think of this my dear and sympathise with me, perhaps the reason for your not doing so before is owing to what I have been told Miss Sarah has been rumouring about my being a married man but God forbid that I, even I, should be led in such a manner for I have had one it is true but she died twelve months yesterday the 4<sup>th</sup> of May...*

We do not know what Eliza Ann wrote prior to this letter but presumably she mentioned her difficulties with Maria Sarah and her daughter Hannah Marie of the Ship Inn. Jenkins was obviously not impressed by them or their behaviour and is troubled by the rumour that he was married. Thus Eliza Ann is told of Jenkins's loss of his wife, which may explain his strength of feeling. There are also suggestions that their correspondence is unknown to her family.

Jenkins also alludes to Eliza's agreement that he should indeed seek to find another ship. But he does not think it would be easy to find a ship out of Pentewan, and his remarks foreshadow the difficulties in getting a cargo that would allow him to set sail to visit Eliza Ann. Thus he continues with the *Heart of Oak*.

**Bangor, May 20<sup>th</sup> 1848**

*Miss Varcoe, Dear Friend*

*You have the kindness no doubt to pardon this my long silence for I must confess that my time of late has fled away like a dream. I received your kind letter the other week at Liverpool, and I am sorry to learn that if your father was acquainted with our correspondence that he would be angry. I do not know why he should be so for I hope it is not his intention to tie you to a single life, but it might be owing to the advantage you have of me as regards wealth. I have to acquaint you that I arrived here yesterday morning from Liverpool and as yet I do not know where I shall go from here. I know where I should like to load for and I will allow you to judge ...*

Jenkins indicates his financial circumstances and confirms that Eliza has indeed been writing secretly. Since he was not a part-owner in *Heart of Oak* he was reliant on his pay as master of the ship, a position that did not bring great wealth. He surmises that this is perhaps the reason Eliza Ann's father would not accept the courtship. Thomas Varcoe may not have wanted to part with his daughter for her to go to an impecunious sea captain from Wales.

**Bangor, June 8<sup>th</sup> 1848**

*Dear Friend*

*... I cannot but approve of your good sense in keeping the secret of our correspondence from your father and likewise from others for a time, but I am afraid that our personal meeting will be of a longer time than I should wish for, because I do not see any likelihood of my coming towards that quarter now, although I have not yet to a certainty ascertained where I shall go from here but I expect it will be to Cork in Ireland. I shall write again before I leave, expecting in the medium to hear from you and you will also oblige me if you give me an account of the shipping times at Pentewan ...*

Unfortunately for Jenkins he did not remain in good health, but fell ill shortly after receiving Eliza Ann's last letter. He was also having difficulties acquiring any cargo, much less a cargo that would take him to Pentewan. His frustration is almost palpable in his words.

**Bangor, June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1848**

*Miss Varcoe*

*The reason I have not answered your last epistle was owing to my health being rather poor this last week or so but blessed be the Lord I am at present quite well, wishing you my dear the same blessing. I am sorry to say that the times here is dull in the extreme. I am here this 4 weeks and no sign of a cargo yet. I am sure I do not know what will become of the shipping if it continues as it is much longer, and God only knows when I shall have the pleasure of conversing face to face with you ...*

**Bangor, July 15<sup>th</sup> 1848**

*Dear E.A.*

*... You'll find that by this my dear that I am still detained here awaiting a cargo which time seems to me as a twelve month, but provided I had been favoured with the company and society of her I love this length of time would have passed merely as a dream. I have partly engaged to load for Wisbeach in the North of England and provided I get this cargo, your brother might favour me in giving me a cargo of coals for Pentewan from the north instead of Capt. Thomas, who has told me he has partly engaged to bring your brother a cargo. If there will be any necessity of me writing to your brother, please inform me how I am to address my letter to him. I should wish to know by return in case I get this load I am partly engaged for. Dear Love, I cannot here explain to you I long to be with you but I hope the Lord will favour me with the pleasure I do long for, I was told the night before last by Capt. Jones of the 'Mona Isle' that he had been in company in Pentewan and I questioned him who he had seen there and he had been with you at the card table for a short time about a fortnight ago. I shall not, my love, trouble you with too long a letter this time, fondly wishing the pleasure of seeing you ere long where we can throw open each heart to one another, and that in the manner your true lover at present wishes for...*

*A dozen pure kisses*

It is not surprising that these masters knew each other. The 68 ton schooner *Mona Isle* was built in Anglesey in 1838 and owned by John Thomas of Bangor.<sup>27</sup> For inhabitants of Anglesey and Bangor the sea was the main source

<sup>27</sup> *Claytons Directory 1865*

of employment for a substantial portion of the male population. The ships out of Anglesey carried out copper and slate but might be involved in all trades around the world as the history of the *Heart of Oak* shows. Jenkins's letter continues the theme that he was having difficulties in getting cargoes and he hoped, by using Eliza Ann as a go-between, that her brother John would assist him.

At this time British vessels were competing for coastwise cargoes within the British Isles since the political situation leading to the 1848 revolutions on the Continent had already restricted trade with continental ports. Three weeks before this letter was written the *West Briton* reported that upwards of forty foreign ships were anchored in Falmouth harbour, some for seven weeks because of this disruption.<sup>28</sup> Jenkins's comments in his 22 June letter seem to bear out the knock-on effect this instability was having on the maritime trade in general.

### **Bangor July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1848**

*Dear Love,*

*... I am proud to hear of your bravery in saving the life of one of your fellow mortals and it is my opinion that you are deserving of a reward from the Humane Society. You might perhaps laugh at this my opinion ... I have to inform you that I have commenced loading for Hamburg at which place nothing should give me greater pleasure than to behold yourself my love, and I here beg one request of you, that is that you will not condemn me for believing what I have stated to be anything like flattery, for there is one who knows my inward thoughts, to him I appeal. I am extremely obliged to you and John and I give him great credit for his honourable way of dealing. I have mentioned this morning to Capt. Thomas that John fully expected a line from him and he told me he would write to-morrow or Monday and that he is now loading for the North-West of Ireland. I expect I shall be ready to sail about Thursday next, and if you can drop me a few lines against then I shall feel happy for awhile, for most likely I shall not have the pleasure of hearing from you for a few weeks afterwards, but if I put in wind-bound to anywhere I shall write to you my dearest. Once more I must say that I should like to be in company with you and that I don't mean for a day but I'll leave you to guess the term. My kind respects to brother John. It is most likely I shall go to Newcastle or some port in that neighbourhood from Hamburg and I should like to get a cargo from there*

*towards that little spot where is contained the prize I so much wish to be in possession of...*

The Royal Humane Society, established in 1774 to assist victims and to reward lifesaving, instituted their award of medals for bravery in 1775. By the mid-nineteenth century women were still underrepresented in the medal awards, despite their heroism,<sup>29</sup> so Eliza Ann's absence from the medal registers would not have been unusual. However, research into Cornish newspapers has unfortunately drawn a blank regarding news of any heroic life-saving by Eliza, or of any shipwrecks near Pentewan at that time.

Jenkins's quest for a cargo that would take him to Pentewan continued with the assistance of Eliza Ann and her brother John.

<sup>28</sup> *West Briton*, Friday 23 June 1848.

<sup>29</sup> C. Barclay, *Heroes of Peace: The Royal Humane Society and the Award of Medals in Britain, 1774-1914*. PhD thesis, University of York, 2009. Available at [http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/1493/1/complete\\_thesis.pdf](http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/1493/1/complete_thesis.pdf)

**Hamburg, Aug 29<sup>th</sup> 1848***Dear Love*

*I once more embrace the favourable opportunity which presents itself to me in addressing you with a few lines. I arrived here last Friday after experiencing awful weather at sea on my passage. It commenced to rage on the evening on the 21<sup>st</sup>. And on the following night I lost my main-sail and rigging when in the act of laying to. After that and until I got into this harbour I was just drove along by the fury of the waves, but I thank the Lord for rescuing me from what I fully expected, which was no less than a watery grave. I spoke to the captain of the 'Pentewan' last Tuesday week off the Long-ships and bid him acquaint brother John that he had seen me, thinking that by doing so that you my dear might hear that also.... I also, love, have the pleasure to inform you that I have enjoyed good health since I left Bangor. I intend if the wind had been easterly when I got round the Land, to have put in at Falmouth or Fowey and to have paid you a short visit. It is most likely I shall be able to do so by coming down channel. I have just now agreed to load for London or Dublin, I shall know which before I sail...*

The vagaries of weather thwarted Jenkins's attempts visit Eliza Ann reminding us how much the sailing coasters were influenced by wind direction, tides and gales. Thousands of seamen were lost every year to the growing consternation of the British government. Between 1833 and 1835 almost 2000 men drowned.<sup>30</sup> Approximately 642 persons drowned in 1841, 586 in 1842, and 191 thus far in 1843.<sup>31</sup> Jenkins's fears were clearly well-founded.

**Hamburg, Sept 9<sup>th</sup> 1848***Dear E. Ann*

*You will no doubt forgive my long tarry in writing you when I tell you that I have been busy in the extreme ever since my arrival here. I have completely fitted the old vessel out with everything, rigging, sails etc. and this is what has taken up my time. I have commenced loading wheat today either for London or Dublin. I am almost certain it will be for Dublin, and I shall on my way down Channel endeavour to call either Fowey or Falmouth, (without)? hoping the wind at the time will be very fair. Dear love, I have purchased a small dressing-case for you which I hope you will receive as a token of my regard when I can possibly have it conveyed to you. It is but triflish and I could not rightly get it fitted out in dread that it might be taken from me on my arrival in England...*

He seemed so sure that his cargo would be for Dublin rather than London which would afford him a possibility of stopping off to visit Eliza Ann. Alas for him it was for London. It seems fate was conspiring continually to thwart his wishes.

**London, Sept 25 1848**

*... I now embrace the first opportunity which hath presented itself to me in giving you to understand I left Hamburg Wednesday morning last and got into the entrance of this river Saturday evening after witnessing one of the finest passages as possibly could be wished for. Please oblige me with a line or two as I am anxious to hear from you and if you know of any vessel here bound for Pentewan I wish you to favour me if you can with her name and*

<sup>30</sup> Report from the Select Committee appointed to inquire into The Causes of Shipwrecks: with the Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index. Ordered, by the House of Commons, 15 August 1836.

<sup>31</sup> First Report from the Select Committee on Shipwrecks; Together with Minutes of Evidence, Appendix, and Index. Ordered, by the House of Commons, 10 August 1843, Appendix 6.

*where laying so as I can send the article I have afore mentioned. I would rather convey it myself but there is no knowing when fortune will favour me with the chance of coming there... Please to let me know how the tide is at present in Pentewan... I would rather it to be yourself than the letter, but I suppose I must put up with the hopes of visiting that quarter myself shortly...*

At least he was pleased with his ship's performance in favourable weather conditions but Jenkins was obviously getting frustrated with his lack of opportunity to sail to Cornwall. His reference to the tide at Pentewan probably refers to the state of the harbour channel and how silted up it was at that time. His navigational knowledge would have told him the times of the tide anywhere on the coast. Pentewan harbour entrance was bedevilled by silt carried down in the river from nearby tin mining and tin streaming and later from the expanding china clay industry in the hills above St Austell. There were times when ships were trapped in the dock unable to sail. The popularity of Pentewan with ship owners consequently suffered, but nevertheless each crisis was overcome and shipping continued to load ever greater amounts of china clay and to bring in cargoes destined for St Austell and local merchants up the well-used railway.<sup>32</sup>

**London, Oct 2<sup>nd</sup> 1848**

*Miss Varcoe*

*I can scarcely find words to show you the agony your last letter has thrown into that breast who could not and knew not to harbour even the thoughts of even ensuring the one I dreamed of becoming the partner of my bosom. It seems to me Miss that you have believed all you have heard, but I should like to know who the party is that has taken the liberty to condemn me without judge or jury. I beg of you to unfold this mystery and permit me to enjoy the freedom which our country allows which is to plead for myself. I believe that I have been unjustly dealt with by bringing such a false accusation against me.*

*Mystery, mystery.*

*I cannot but fancy that I have a rival in my way. If such is the case, let me know if you regard him as the person you choose before the one who is wounded by Cupid's dart, why I have but to seek that which I thought of finding you in someone else. The refusal of that which was purchased for you alone seems to me as a cloud fixed between me and all my former expectations and fancied charms. If it so deny it, not for the sooner the cloud is cleared the brighter will be the future days of my life. Please to reveal the mystery by return as I shall leave here next Friday for Port Madock. I here conclude wishing you every blessing the Lord can bestow on, this from your wounded admirer.*

<sup>32</sup> Evans & Prettyman, *Pentewan*, p. 31; Restormel District Council, Cornwall Industrial Settlements Initiative: Conservation Area Partnership, March 2002. [http://www.historic-cornwall.org.uk/cisi/pentewan/CISI\\_pentewan\\_report%20.pdf](http://www.historic-cornwall.org.uk/cisi/pentewan/CISI_pentewan_report%20.pdf) Accessed 12 October 2013.

## Conclusion

So ends the relationship begun at least ten months earlier. It is frustrating that we can only guess what was in the letters sent by Eliza Ann, particularly this final one where she refuses his gift and clearly discourages the captain's pursuit of her. There are many possibilities as to why her interest cooled. Maybe her brother advised her to fend off the captain's advances, her father may have found out, or Eliza Ann may simply have lost interest.

Letters that were hidden in the upholstery of chair, which only to come to light a 100 years later, have given us a glimpse into the life of one master mariner and the difficulties he had developing and maintaining a courtship. His life at sea was dictated by the managing owner of his ship,<sup>33</sup> the availability of cargoes, and the vagaries of weather, all of which conspired against him in his quest for the hand of Eliza Ann. His only other option was to change ships even if that meant taking a lower position as mate, and even then it is doubtful he would have been able to ship to Pentewan. And his future family life, even if he had managed to continue the connection, would also have depended on the willingness of one or other of the couple to move. As Helen Doe writes, 'home ties both familial and domestic were restrictions for many women'. Even though the ships entering the ports of the smallest of coastal communities became part of the network-wide links,<sup>34</sup> for women to move far from their families was a major leap.

Eliza Ann's experience with David Jenkins supports the view of the difficulties maintaining relations with mariners. However, if the life of the shore-bound mariner's wife was one of constant leave taking and reunion, at least there were stronger ties to bind them. The mariner's wife was central to the networking of information and contacts that involved her husband and Captain Jenkins had tried to tap into that network.<sup>35</sup> However, a brief encounter such as that between Eliza Ann and Jenkins, with only letters to keep a relationship alive, was unlikely to thrive.

Eliza Ann married John Kellow three years later. They settled in Pentewan and had five children.<sup>36</sup> Kellow, early on, became master of his father-in-law's schooner *Thomas Varcoe* and later master of the brigantine *William*, another of the small fleet of ships managed by Varcoe. Kellow later retired from the sea and, shore-based, took on management of the small fleet. He was also notable for being the agent responsible for the first steamship, the SS *Maggie*, laden with coal, to enter Pentewan in 1873 and for the first cargo of coal to be transported up the railway line by the new steam locomotives. Two years later John Kellow commissioned a new schooner from a yard in Newquay naming her *Mary Kellow* after their three-year-old daughter. William Varcoe Kellow, their son, carried on with the family tradition, owning and managing a small fleet of vessels right to the end of the wooden sailing ship era.<sup>37</sup>

David Jenkins's fate is unknown. Whether he ever called into Pentewan again to load a cargo of china clay we do not know. The 1853 *Mercantile Navy List* does not list a D. Jenkins as an accredited master mariner. He was master of a small coastwise vessel in a time that did not require official certification. The search for his history is also hampered by the prevalence of his name. We know that Jenkins remained master of the *Heart of Oak* in 1849, but since records are

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<sup>33</sup> Helen Doe, 'Power, Authority and Communications: The Role of the Master and the Managing Owner in Nineteenth Century Merchant Shipping', *International Journal of Maritime History*, Vol XXV, No 1, June 2013, pp. 103-26.

<sup>34</sup> Helen Doe 'Travelling by Staying at Home: Women in Small Ports and their Overseas Connections in the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Transport History*, December 2009, p. 185.

<sup>35</sup> Doe, 'Travelling by Staying at Home', p. 197.

<sup>36</sup> [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) 1861 census.

<sup>37</sup> Basil Greenhill, *The Merchant Schooners*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1988), p. 222.

not extant for the 1850s we do not know how long he remained with her. By 1863, when the vessel is reported as 'lost', her master was O. Roberts.<sup>38</sup> The *Heart of Oak* had sailed for 93 years, a quite remarkable length of time for a trading vessel of this period.

And finally, Pentewan lost the fight with its competition. China clay shipments had been transferred to the flourishing ports of Fowey, Par and Charlestown. It had clung on to a final, small trade of shipping out sand and concrete blocks. The dock closed for good in 1942.

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<sup>38</sup> Caernarfon Record Office: Beaumaris Shipping Registers.