

The Butsons Of Polruan, Ship Builders from 1839 to 1875

The picturesque village of Bodinnick situated on the east bank of the River Fowey, overlooks Fowey town. This small village in the parish of Lanteglos is surrounded by beautiful countryside and ancient farmland. Many of the nearby farms date back to Domesday records of 1086, and much of the landscape has changed very little since then.

In the early 1800's there were several ship building yards in Polruan. One of the largest would eventually belong to the Butson family. The owner Nicholas Butson began trading in Polruan in 1839 and built up a profitable and successful business in the town.

Nicholas Butson (senior) was born in 1779 in the small village of St Stephen in Brannel near St Austell. He left his agricultural and mining roots to move to Mevagissey, on the south coast where it is thought that he took an apprenticeship with a boatbuilding yard. On 15 August 1807 he married Ann Hunkin in Mevagissey. They had seven children, three died in infancy, four survived, two sons and two daughters. Some of the children were baptised in Mevagissey and some in St Austell Wesleyan Chapel. The two daughters were called Selina and Melinda. The two sons who survived were Nicholas John Butson, born 1818 and Joseph William Trudgian Butson born 1822.

There was a small boatyard at Bodinnick about half a mile up river from Polruan on the east side of the river beside the ferry crossing; it was occupied by one John Marks, shipwright, who built sailing vessels there from 1826 to 1846. He lived in the loft over the boathouse, which was owned by Lady Grenville. He also leased Geaches Boat Yard in West Street, Polruan. Around 1837 Geaches Yard went bankrupt but John Marks continued to trade from his smaller yard at Bodinnick. He built several ships there, one of them being the 60-ton sloop "Abeona". At this time Nicholas Butson was living in West Steet in Polruan, he worked as a shipwright in Geaches Yard, near to the Tudor castle at the mouth of the River Fowey. When Geaches went bankrupt Nicholas Butson somehow found the money to take over the yard, it is possible that his wife came from a prosperous Mevagissey family. He renamed it "Butsons Yard" and produced his first ship there in 1839. It was the "Gallant", a 110 ton schooner commissioned by Joseph Trefry, one of Cornwall's leading industrialists who lived over the river in Fowey. A few months later he built another ship for Trefry, the "Model", a 60 ton sloop, Nicholas became a master ship builder at the ripe old age of 60 years.

Nicholas' sons Nicholas junior and Joseph had served their shipwright apprenticeships with their father and were working with him in his yard.

Nicholas Butson senior must have been making good money from his enterprise. He bought a piece of land called Castle Meadow in Polruan where he built the Primitive Methodist Ebenezer Chapel. His daughter Melinda's children were baptised in this chapel, which still stands in West Street although now converted to a private house.

In 1842, the square rig schooner "Alert" was built by Butsons Boatyard at Youngs Quay in West Street, Polruan; she was 68 tons, 60 feet long, 16 feet wide and 9 feet deep. There were 64 shares in the ship and in it's future trading profit, Nicholas senior had four shares and the rest were allocated to other investors, sea captains, business men and other ship builders. By selling shares the shipbuilder could raise the money for the construction of the ship. The "Alert" was Nicholas Butson senior's last ship, he died in 1844 and buried at Lanteglos church.

Nicholas Butson's estate was administered by his two surviving sons Nicholas junior and Joseph. They took over the boatyard and they were doing well enough to appear in the Post Office directory as "N and J Butson, Ship Builders of Polruan". The 1851 Census also shows their occupation as ship builders. However, these were difficult trading times and they only built four new ships in the next ten years. In 1868 they acquired the Bodinnick boatyard. John Marks moved out and Nicholas junior moved into the house. The property had been extended; a curious wooden top storey had been added to the roof. They also took the lease of the nearby Ferry Inn and they acquired the contract to operate the passenger ferry boat which linked Fowey with Bodinnick. The brothers' business grew and prospered, within a few years they built a new shipyard and quay at Brazen Island, constructing a slipway at the entrance to Pont Creek, an inlet between Bodinnick and Polruan. Brazen Island Yard was situated at the far end of East Street in Polruan.

In 1858 a local newspaper reported the following incident: - "On 11 February a landslip took place in the new boat building yard of Messrs N and J Butson at Polruan, near to which was a vessel almost completed in its frame, intended to carry 200 tons. The earth fell against the shore by which the vessel was supported, starting her 3 feet from her original position and by falling down in the yard the whole structure became dis-united by which the loss to the builders must be considerable. It is generally believed that if the landslip had taken place an hour or two later, several lives would have been lost, as the workforce were employed near to the spot where it fell".

Apparently the edge of the quay became detached from the land behind it, thought to be subsidence caused by the weight of the ship they were building and the removal of stone from nearby Brazen Island, a small rocky outcrop in Polruan harbour a short distance out into the river from the boat yard.

In May 1860 the Butsons launched a schooner of 123 tons, the “Thomas Aylan”. Also at that time steam ships were beginning to appear. In 1864 the newspaper the “West Briton” published an article about it. “Messrs Butson at Fowey are constructing a small steamer, owned by a company in Mevagissey, to be used as a driver for mackerel and pilchards and as a collector in case of calms so that the fish may be forwarded to the markets in time. It is an experiment and may be the means of developing fishing resources”. No trace has been found of this steamer and the venture may not have been a successful one.

In 1861 Nicholas is shown in the census as age 43, living in Fore Street, Polruan, a shipbuilder employing 9 men and 3 boys. By 1868 they had given up one of their other yards at Youngs Quay near the lower ferry, it was taken over by the Slade family.

The first large ship which the Butson brothers built at Bodinnick was the “Rippling Wave”. A 130-ton schooner, it was launched on March 27 1869. This ship embarked on her maiden voyage two months later. She became the first vessel to take out china clay loaded in Fowey Harbour onward bound for Italy. The newly constructed railway carried the processed clay from the quarries to the dock which had been built about a half a mile up river from the Bodinnick yard. This railway and dock still operate today. “Rippling Wave” was built for Thomas Hall Knight, a Lostwithiel merchant who invested in at least half a dozen Butson vessels. She carried her cargo to Genoa and then went on to Leghorn, loading marble destined for Bristol where she arrived on 5 September 1869. Her first captain, Thomas Roberts, was swept overboard in the Bay of Biscay, he was rescued but drowned on 10 October 1878 aged 43. The ship was in service for 38 years before being wrecked at South rock, County Down in Ireland in 1907.

In May 1870, the following article appeared in the Royal Cornwall Gazette: - “A very successful launch of a fine clipper schooner was effected at Brazen Yard by Messrs Butson. She is to be classed A1, 8 years at Lloyds, her dimensions are 102 feet long, breadth 24 feet and tonnage 184 and she will carry 300 tons. The vessel is called the “Island Lass” and is intended for the Mediterranean trade.”

Unfortunately a disaster happened during the building of “Island Lass”. Two weeks before the launch Nicholas suffered a dreadful accident, as reported in

the Royal Cornwall Gazette. "On the 23 April 1870 Mr Nicholas Butson, of the firm N and J Butson, shipbuilders of Bodinnick and Polruan, was engaged in working on a new vessel now completing at Brazen Yard. He by some means fell off the scaffolding and came with great force to the ground sustaining a fracture of the skull and compression of the spine, besides other injuries. The unfortunate sufferer, who is under the care of Dr Davies, of Fowey, lies in a precarious state. "

Nicholas must have recovered reasonably well after the accident as the 1871 Census shows that he was still living in the accommodation above the boatyard at Bodinnick, employing 15 men and 5 boys. His brother Joseph William Trudgian Butson was then living in Polruan, born in 1822, he was four years younger than his brother. He married twice and had ten children by the time of the 1861 census. In 1871 he is shown as a shipbuilder, employing 18 men and 3 boys.

The brothers built the 102ft brigantine "Gem" at Bodinnick in 1871, also the fruit schooner "Thetis" as well as several other vessels at Brazen Island. Up until then they had usually managed to launch at least one ship a year from each of their yards. Nicholas Butson died in 1872. His tombstone in Lanteglos-by-Fowey church reads: - "In affectionate remembrance of Nicholas J Butson who died Sept 14 1872 age 54 years. Praises on tombs are trifles vainly spent. A man's life is his best monument". Nicholas left a daughter Jane Ann who died at the age of 23 and a son Joseph William Butson who carried on the business. Joseph William is shown in the 1881 census as a ship builder living in Polruan.

The last Butson ship to be built was the 104 foot brigantine "Undine", weighing 174 tons, she was launched from Brazen Island in 1875 and was reputed to "sail like a witch". She traded the Atlantic and the West Indies. In 1879 the yard built the largest and the last vessel to be built in Fowey Harbour, the E. S. Hocken, a 296 ton barquette built for the Hocken family of sea captains. The yard continued to repair and maintain the now declining fleet of sailing ships which worked from Fowey. By 1884 the Brazen Island yard lease was given up and the buildings were taken over by a sardine cannery. After this the family moved the main business back to Bodinnick to concentrate on building and repairing smaller craft.

Nicholas' surviving brother Joseph Trudgian Butson continued to run the boatyard, he was also a well respected Methodist local preacher, he went all over the area on horseback with his Airedale dog running behind. One day, due to thunder, he was thrown from his horse and lay unconscious on the ground. The dog ran 20 miles to Joseph's family in Polruan and led them back

to his master who recovered well from his accident. When Joseph died his wife Jane was blind and one of his sons was listed as an “imbecile”. There are quite a few Butson gravestones in the graveyard of the church at nearby Lanteglos, just up the hill to the east of Polruan, and also two later ones in the new graveyard at Fowey. The Butson gravestones can easily be found in Lanteglos churchyard, a diagram showing their location can be found inside the church.

In 1881, in the grip of the Great Depression, the yards of Polruan, Fowey and Bodinnick were no longer building cargo carrying wooden ships. The future was with iron and steam power, centred in the north on the Tyne and the Clyde shipyards.

In 1921 the remaining Butson sons gave up the lease on their yard at Bodinnick. With the decline in wooden shipbuilding it was no longer profitable. The property was sold and became a private house. It was renamed Swiss Cottage because of the distinctive chalet style top storey. In 1926 the new owner put it up for sale.

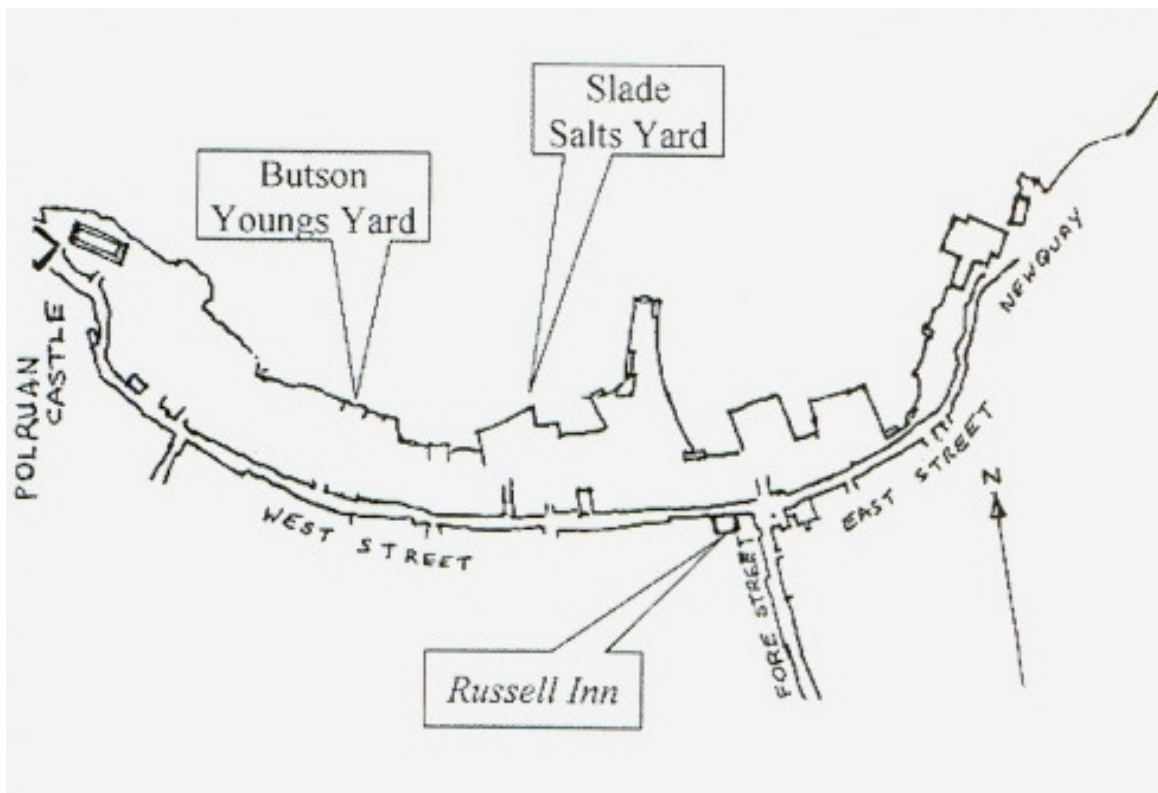
Swiss Cottage was bought by the famous London actor Gerald Du Maurier. He saw the house while waiting to board the Bodinnick ferry during a tour of Cornwall and decided to buy it. He renamed it “Ferryside”, his daughter Daphne Du Maurier wrote her first book there, “The Loving Spirit”, a novel based on the story of a boat the Jane Slade, owned by the Slade family who were also boat builders in Polruan. The house remains in the Du Maurier family today, occupied by her son Christian du Maurier. The figurehead of the ship “Jane Slade” which features in Daphne’s novel “The Loving Spirit” is mounted on the top storey of the house, looking out along the river Fowey to the sea. This novel is well worth reading for its descriptions of the life led by shipbuilding and seafaring families such as the Butsons in the 19th century.

Daphne Du Maurier wrote in her book “Vanishing Cornwall”:-

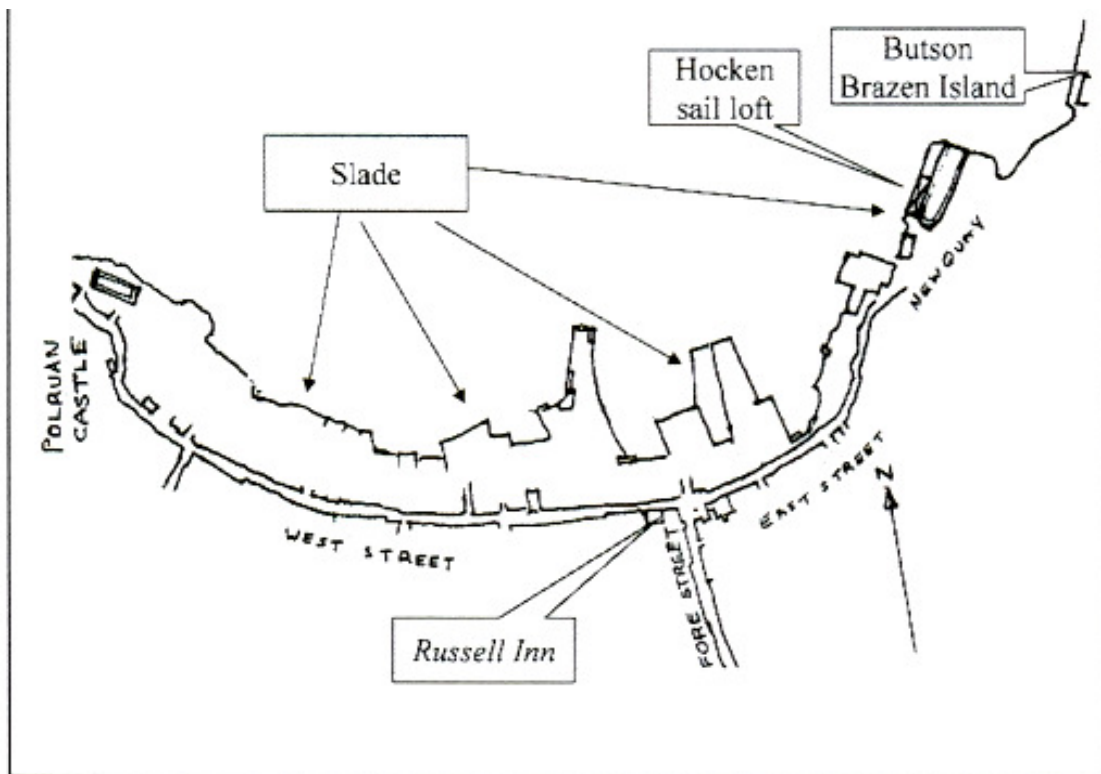
“The hired car deposited our mother and ourselves at the foot of the hill by the Bodinnick ferry. We could either cross the ferry to Fowey or lunch first at the Ferry Inn. We chose the latter course. Before climbing the hill to lunch our eyes were caught by a board saying “For sale”, on a gate just above the ferry. Behind the gate was a rough piece of ground and a house by the waters edge, a strange looking house built like a Swiss chalet. “Yes”, said the ferryman standing nearby, “they call it Swiss Cottage. They used to build boats there, down under and have the second floor for lofts. The top floor was for living. It for sale right enough”. We went to the inn for lunch and afterwards our mother talked with the proprietor, enquiring first about lodgings on the opposite side of the river in Fowey. We were touring Cornwall, she explained, with the idea

of looking for a house for the holidays, we came from Hampstead, London. Leaving my mother talking I went down the hill. I tried the gate by the ferry and went into the yard. Here there was a garden , and the windows of the house looked over the harbour. A big ship was drawing near, and moored a few cables length from the house. There was a smell in the air, of tar and rope and rusted chain. Down the harbour I could glimpse the open sea. It was not pure chance that brought us to the ferry, and the bottom of Bodinnick Hill, and to the board upon the gate beyond that said - For Sale”.

The Butson Boatyard lives on in history, few visitors who today view the large white house with its amazing timbered chalet top storey would realise that it ever built ships. The Butsons carried on building and renovating small boats until 1939 but unfortunately none of the family live in Fowey today. A house in Passage Street in Fowey bears the name “Butson” on the door and is still owned by a Butson descendant who now lives in Tavistock in Devon. In 1905 one of Joseph’s sons emigrated to Kenora in Canada where his family are still building and renovating wooden pleasure craft today in a yard called “Butson’s Boats”. The tradition and the name live on.



A map of Polruan harbour showing the site of Butsons first yard at Youngs Quay in West Street.



Occupiers of Polruan Yards c1868

Brazen Island Yard is up river from where New Quay is shown on the map. By 1868 the Slades have taken over Youngs Quay in West Street.



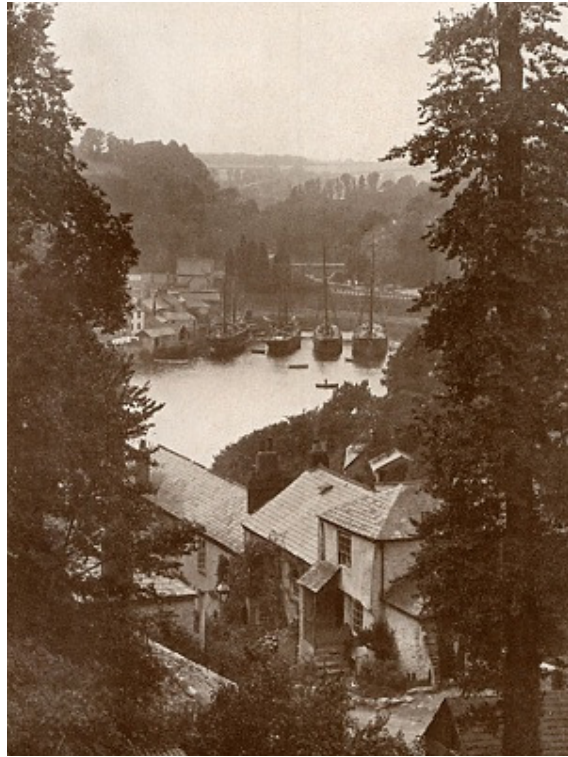
A schooner alongside Butsons Boatyard at Bodinnick.



Ships in the harbour at Polruan (about 1880).



Joseph William Trudgian Butson, ship builder and Methodist preacher.



A view down to the ferry at Bodinnick (about 1880).



The Old Ferry Inn (centre) and the blue and white house known as “Ferryside”, (right) which was originally Butsons Boatyard. It has been owned by the Du Maurier family since 1926. The Bodinnick ferry lands at the slipway (bottom left).

The ferry crossing dates back to the 14th century (1340) and belonged to the manor of Bodinnick at Hall.

The Old Ferry Inn is over four hundred years old and dates back to the 1600's as do many of the old fishermen's' and shipbuilders' cottages. On maps dated 1771 from the Boconnoc estate, the site of the Old Ferry Inn was listed as The Great House owned by Mrs Williams, widow of a merchant whose cellars were attached to the house. The inn was then named Passage House and on the site of the old boatyard where Ferryside garage now stands. St. John's church was originally the stables for The Great House and then the Old Ferry Inn. Ferryside, the large building on the water's edge beside the ferry, was once the family home of the Du Mauriers and where Daphne wrote her novel "The Loving Spirit."



The View of Ferryside looking down river from the Ferry Inn

Originally a shipyard, Ferryside is where many famous Fowey sailing ships were built. Many of the old cottages were originally part of the nearby Boconnoc estate and rented by tenants. The families were employed in pilchard fishing, shipbuilding, dock work and farming. The Old School House towards the top of the hill is where the village children went to school and water was collected from the village well by school children on their way home right up to the 1960s.