

PLYMOUTH – A HISTORY

When Exeter was created a town by the Romans, Plymouth was still non-existent.

However, there is a belief that the name Stonehouse originated through the existence of a stone-built dwelling in the vicinity and that the Romans were the only people who could have constructed such a prominent building.

It was not until the Saxon invasion that Plymouth started to emerge. It is generally thought that the Saxons who came to settle the land arrived by sea. Possibly they first landed on the island that later became St Nicholas's Island, from where they could investigate the creeks and rivers while maintaining a secure retreat on the Island in the event of meeting with hostile natives who didn't realise they had been conquered. The settlers set up many homesteads, of which one was on the northern shore of Sutton Pool. It acquired the name of Sudtone, or Sutton, which meant 'South Farm'. The principal occupation of its inhabitants was fishing and its trade and wealth must have increased as other settlers cleared and farmed the land towards the north.

When the Normans came soon after 1066 they called these homesteads 'Manors', a title with which they were familiar from their homeland in Normandy. But the mother of the defeated English king, King Harold, had large estates in Devon and Cornwall, including Exeter, and it quickly became obvious to the new King that he had to

defeat her as well. He besieged and captured Exeter and built the castle of Rougemont as a deterrent to further trouble. He then ordered castles to be built at Totnes, Plympton, Trematon, Restormel and Launceston before he returned to his headquarters at Winchester.

In those days the King owned all the land and other people could only gain land by a grant from the monarch. Thus much of the land in our modern Plymouth was given to one of his loyal knights, Judhel, who based himself at Totnes Castle. He did not have the Manors of Honicknowle and Lipson, which the King granted to Robert, Count of Mortain as part of the Honour of Trematon, while Budshead and Tamerton Foliot went to Alvred the Breton; Efford, Stonehouse and the lands of the Saxon canons at Plympton were granted to Robert the Bastard; Stoke, Widey and Whiteleigh went to Robert of D'Albermarle; Plymstock went to William Chevre of Tavistock; and Goosewell was placed in the hands of William of Poilley. [2]

However, The King himself kept control of the Manors of Sutton, King's Tamerton (to distinguish it from Tamerton that became Tamerton Foliot) and Plympton for strategic reasons. [2]

Sometime after 1106 King Henry I gave the Royal Manors of Sutton and King's Tamerton, along with the Manor of Maker in Cornwall, to Reginald de Vautort (Valletort) as a reward for services rendered at the battle of Tinchebrai in Normandy. The Valletort's endowed the new Plympton Priory when it was founded around 1121. The Prior's power over the area was later to cause a great deal of friction with the burgesses of the growing township of Plymouth.

Meanwhile, Plympton was growing fast. Houses were built near the castle and the small township of Plympton Erle was gaining in importance, so much so that in 1194 it became a market town while Sutton was still little more than a village.

Plympton was the main centre of population until the mid-1300s. Its main industry was exporting Dartmoor tin and in 1328 it petitioned to become a Stannary Town on the basis that the tin could be loaded direct onto ships for export whereas at Tavistock it had to be transported by road to the River Tamar before it could be shipped. Although its petition succeeded, Plympton eventually lost its trade to Sutton when the river Plym silted up with the waste from the tin-streaming.

Crispin Gill states that the name Plym Mouth was first used in the Pipe Rolls for 1211 when a shipload of bacon was despatched to Portsmouth and another of wine to Nottingham. Plymouth clearly grew in importance as a result of this trade and it became a market town on January 27th 1254, although the Prior of Plympton held the market rights. It led to claims and counter-claims about who was lord of the manor and an inquiry was held. The judge reached certain important decisions, namely that the original Sutton, on the north shore of Sutton Pool, was owned by the Prior of Plympton; that the so far undeveloped land to the south was owned by a John Valletort; and the port itself belonged to the King.

Plymouth prospered and grew but in the 14th and 15th centuries it suffered many attempts at invasion. A French fleet descended on the Town in 1339 and set fire to some houses. Again in 1350 the town was raided but this time the French were able to destroy only a few outlying farms and possibly the hamlet of West Stonehouse, which then lay in the parish of Maker, across the Hamoaze.

Several times during the 14th and 15th centuries the French set fire to the Town. The largest French fleet of all came on Wednesday August 10th 1403, when a force of 30 ships and 1,200 men landed to the east of the town and burnt and plundered some 600 houses. The townsfolk put up a good fight, however, and the invasion lasted only the one night.

Plymouth's attempts to get corporate independence started as early as 1384. The Prior of Plympton appointed a reeve or Prepositus who officiated on his behalf at the market court held every Monday. However, in 1384 some leading men of the town elected one Henry Passour to be Mayor, without the approval of the Prior. Confrontation was inevitable. It resulted in a Royal Inquiry being held at Eggbuckland in June 1385 which upheld the Prior's rights.

After the French raids the people of Plymouth sent a petition to Parliament requesting permission to elect a Mayor and corporation. They badly wanted to build a wall around the town to protect their homes but they could do so only by buying land. That they could not do unless they were a body corporate. The petition was rejected so they got on with the wall as best they could. The castle was also built at this time.

A fresh petition was sent to Parliament in 1439 and the Charter of Incorporation was granted by King Henry VI -- the first such charter in the country to be granted by Act of Parliament.

The extent of the Town was still very small. There was very little south of Notte Street although the line of Southside Street ran towards the Castle, which was situated just above what is now the West Pier. There was a gate here, the Barbican Gate. From Notte Street there ran a street up to Hoe Gate. To the west there was nothing beyond Catherine Street although the wall was much further out. The West or Frankfort Gate was at the junction of routes to what was then called the Sourepool and to Stonehouse. Looe Street, Buckwell Street and the southern part of Old Town Street existed. The wall ran along the northern boundary, past Old Town Gate and then south to Martyn's or East Gate. Breton Side, where it all began on the northern shore of Sutton Pool, lay outside the wall until much later. Also outside the wall was the Carmelite Friary from which Friary Station later took its name.

It might be mentioned that the main access to the Town from the London direction was along what is now Old Laira Road, Lipson Vale, up the very steep northern slope of Lipson Hill and then down the more gentle southern side to join the present Gasking Street, which much later was to boast a Town Gate of its own. Entry into the Town proper would have been through Martyn's Gate, by the present King's Head public house.

The route from the Tavistock gave some choice, along the ancient way from Mutley Plain across the hill to North Street and down to Breton Side or by the newer route down what is now Tavistock Road to the Old Town Gate near Mark's and Spencer's. (No, they were not there then!!)

Naturally the Town grew steadily throughout the 15th and 16th centuries but the new development had to be squeezed within the Town Walls. There was some expansion in the 15th century when the wall was extended eastwards and gates at North Street and Coxside (Sutton Road) were added. The land outside the walls was purely agricultural, with farms only at such places as Pennycross, Mutley, Compton, St Budeaux and Keyham, many echoing place-names that have all but disappeared, like Tor and Venn in the Peverell area.

Devonport did not exist at this time. The area it later covered was again purely agricultural, with the manor house at Keyham Barton, overlooking Keyham Lake. The Lake, or really it was a creek, stretched from the Hamoaze right up to the base of Swilly and was crossed at the Ford from which Ford Hill took its name. The parish church was known as Stoke Damerel and the parish stretched right up to St Budeaux and eastwards to the stream on the in the valley below what is now Central Park.

The 16th century was of course the time of Francis Drake. In 1572, for instance, Drake sailed from Plymouth to Nombre

de Dios, from where he and John Oxenham became the first Englishmen to glimpse the Pacific Ocean. When he returned to Plymouth on Sunday August 9th the following year, the townsfolk were all at worship but when the word got around that Drake was back, St Andrew's Church quickly emptied and the minister was apparently left preaching to himself. Drake's voyage in 1577 to attack the Spanish treasure ships quickly developed into his famous circumnavigation of the world, from which he returned to plague-stricken Plymouth three years later. On April 5th 1581 he was knighted aboard his ship the "Golden Hind" moored at Deptford.

During the next sixty years Plymouth was to witness two more events of national importance, the defeating of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the sailing of the Pilgrim Fathers in 1620 to found New Plymouth in America, before the rigours of the Civil War.

Plymouth as a town disliked royalty as is witnessed by the fact that its petitions for independence were addressed to Parliament rather than the King, so it was perhaps no surprise that it came out on the side of Parliament in the Civil War. Probably the town's greatest day of the War was on December 3rd 1643 when they successfully fought off an attack by Prince Maurice's army. The Sabbath Day Fight is commemorated by a memorial in Freedom Fields Park. The town was then blockaded by the Royalists forces for three years, causing much hardship to the population.

As a strongly Protestant town, and having fought hard for the right to govern itself, Plymouth did not take to being dictated to, especially by the monarch. Consequently, when King Charles I installed a "royalist" cleric at St Andrew's Church, at that time Plymouth's only place of worship, the Corporation was not best pleased. Thinking that there might be further royal interventions ahead, the town petitioned in 1634 for a new parish to be created on the pretence that St Andrew's

Church was no longer large enough for its religious needs. The parish was to be named Charles so the King could hardly refuse, although he took seven years to make up his mind.

Building started in 1640/41. It had reached roof level by the time the Civil War intervened in 1642. Work restarted after the Civil War and it was consecrated by the Bishop of Exeter, Seth Ward, on September 2nd 1665 and the parish of Charles was created.

When William of Orange landed at Brixham in 1688, Plymouth became the first town in England to declare support for him. And it is to him that Plymouth owes its major industry. Plymouth had been a naval station for centuries but it never had good facilities for repairing men-of-war. King William changed all this when in 1691 he authorised work to begin on the first dock over to the west, on the banks of the Hamoaze. As this expanded through the 18th century, so too did the township around it, which was known as Plymouth Dock.

During the eighteenth century the wall that had protected Plymouth during the siege fell into disuse. Indeed, it was hampering the expansion of the Town. It was presumably looted steadily by the inhabitants for their own building projects (It may be no coincidence that the first brick-built house with sash windows was built at Breton Side in 1707) until by the middle of the century the gates within the wall were becoming rather pointless. Their narrowness, from the days of pure horse travel, were causing inconvenience to the new wagons that were appearing. A Board of Commissioners was set up to pave, light and watch the Town and amongst the improvements they instituted was the demolition of some of the redundant Town gates. Friary Gate went in 1763, Gascoigne (North) Gate in 1768, and Frankfort (West) Gate in 1783. Martyn's Gate remained within the Town wall but was not removed until 1789.

This encouraged the wealthy merchants to start moving out of Town. In 1776 George Street had been laid out beyond the West Gate as a series of suburban residences. Even when the Theatre Royal was erected at the western end of the Street, people claimed it was foolish as it was outside the Town. But how quickly the houses of the well-to-do crept towards it. With the demolition of the West Gate, Frankfort Street soon followed.

With the removal of the Old Town and Coxside Gates in 1809, the scene was set for growth. R N Worth lists the new streets built between 1793 and 1812 as Tavistock Street (1803), Portland Place, Orchard Place, Park Street (1809), Duke Street, Cornwall Street (1810), York Street (otherwise known as New Town), Richmond Street (1811), Barrack Street (later called Russell Street), Willow Street, Arch Street, Market Alley, Hampton Buildings, Exeter Street, Jubilee Street, Brunswick Terrace (1811), Ladywell Buildings and Lambhay Street.

Also built in this period were Gascoigne Terrace and Portland Square (both in 1811), Cobourg Street, James Street, Union Road (1816), Union Terrace, Queen Street, King Street, Princess Street, the Crescent, St Andrew Terrace, Charles Place, Fareham Place and Woodside. All of these were outside the old Town wall.

Even in those days there were attempts to build what we would today call 'affordable housing' for the poor but the projects all fell by the wayside.

By the early decades of the 19th century, Plymouth Dock was bigger than Plymouth itself and yearned for a separate identity. This it achieved and on January 1st 1824 the Town got its own identity as Devonport. A column was erected in commemoration.

A third town had been growing between Plymouth and the Dock. Called East Stonehouse, it was here that several

military establishments were situated and the commercial docks at Millbay were developed.

Probably the key to Plymouth's expansion was transport. In 1877 a new station at North Road was opened. Tramways and horse buses linked the Three Towns and also ran northwards via Compton as far as Roborough village. The Embankment, built in 1815, had levelled the road into Plymouth and made travel easier for the poor horse. It was all systems "Go!".

In the 1870s and especially the following decade, building went ahead with great pace, much of it, so Worth claims, speculative. The area at Eldad was completed, houses lined new streets at North Road, North Hill and Houndiscombe, the fields around Greenbank and within the Beaumont estate were covered with fine dwellings stretching from Freedom Fields down to Cattedown on the Exeter road.

Over in Devonport, villas had already appeared at Ford, a product of speculation as early as the 1850s. Stoke and the north facing slope of the St Levan valley filled as quickly as any part of neighbouring Plymouth. By the end of the century, Keyham Lake would be filled and houses erected on the opposite hillside around Keyham Barton. This area was already served by the railway, the new Plymouth, Devonport and South Western Junction line from St Budeaux to Devonport.

The end of the 19th century saw the official expansion of both Plymouth and Devonport with the extension of their boundaries. In 1896 Plymouth absorbed parts of the Compton and Weston Peverel areas.

Then in 1898 Devonport expanded to take in the St Budeaux side of Weston Mill Creek and eventually Saltash Passage, which until now had been in Cornwall, was transferred into Plymouth and thereby into Devon. Eventually, the Pennycross area of Weston Peverell

was also added and Corporation Road near Burleigh traffic lights refers to Devonport Corporation not to Plymouth.

During the Great War many schools were turned over to the military authorities for use as temporary hospitals to house the wounded. When War was declared in 1914 the military commander brought pressure on the civic bodies to amalgamate the Urban District of East Stonehouse, the Borough of Devonport and the County Borough of Plymouth to form the new Plymouth. These were the "Three Towns" of which every visitor will hear at some time during their stay. Plymouth was granted City status in 1928 and a Lord Mayor was first elected in 1935.

With the need for more land for houses, the City took over the remainder of St Budeaux parish in 1938, its northern boundary now extending from Budeshead Creek to the main road from Plymouth to Tavistock.

During the Second World War (1939-1945), and especially during the five nights of the Plymouth Blitz (1941), the City suffered tremendous damage but even before it was over plans were being made to create a new city out of the ashes. The entire city centre, its "heart", was obliterated save for St Andrew's Church, the Guildhall, the Regent Cinema (now demolished) and the offices of the Western Morning News Company, now Waterstone's Bookshop.

In 1967 the boundary was again extended to take in the neighbouring, older town of Plympton, and the villages of Plymstock and Tamerton Foliot.

And in that same year, Plymouth was instrumental in proving that the spirit of adventure it had sheltered for all those centuries was not dead yet. On the evening of May 28th, crowds of people from all over the country gathered on Plymouth Hoe to welcome home Francis Chichester (who was later knighted) after his single-handed circumnavigation of the globe which he had started from

Plymouth on August 28th the previous year.

So that it the story of the growth of the present City of Plymouth, from a small fishing village on the banks of Sutton Pool to the major centre of population and commerce south west of Bristol.

Principal Source:

Gill, Crispin, "Plymouth: A New History", two volumes, *David & Charles (Publishers) Ltd*, Newton Abbot, 1966 and 1979.

Other Sources:

[2] Morris, John (general editor), "Domesday Book, volume 9, Devon", *Phillimore & Company Ltd*, Chichester, 1985.

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