

A brief history of Cornish Pilot Gigs

Cornish Pilot Gigs date back 200 years. Built from Cornish Leaf Elm, 32ft long with a beam of 4ft 10in, they were designed as six oared working boats, seaworthy, fast and adaptable, with seating for the coxswain and an extra space for a passenger. The Revenue outlawed gigs from carrying eight oars because eight oars could out run any vessel the Revenue had!

Back in the nineteenth century, Cornwall was a centre of industry, such as mining and quarrying, and goods were transported by sea to the rest of the country and beyond. The problem for the cargo ships was the often unseen rocky outcrops, which could be hazardous to captains unfamiliar to the seascape. So the Cornish pilot gigs had a key role to ensure the passage of these ships to inland waters and harbours. They carried a skilled pilot, on the spare seat, out to the bigger vessels so that he could guide them into harbour. Rowing the gig was probably even more competitive than it is today; the crew that got the pilot to the ship first were the crew that got the work. The last gigs raced out of Port Isaac to guide visiting shipping safely into the harbour was in the 1890s.

John Watts Trevan mentions gigs in his *Summary Memoirs of the Parish of Endellion prior to the year of 1834*. He records *Rose*, a four oared gig, owned by Mr Guy esq and two six oared gigs, the *Fear Not* owned by R Mitchell and Co and the *Lark* owned by John Lark and Co. It was most likely one of these gigs that went out to help the Dutch ship, *Elizabeth Joanna*, when she foundered about a quarter of a mile off Port Isaac in 1822:

“Signal guns were heard along the coast the night before she appeared off Port Isaac which, as soon as seen on the morning, was immediately went off to by a gig.”

These versatile little boats were the forerunners to lifeboats with many gigs being involved in rescues at sea.

Gigs were also an integral part of the pilchard fishing off Port Isaac. Once the seine net was full of pilchard it would be anchored down and surrounded by gigs and other small boats into which the men scooped the fish for the short journey to shore.

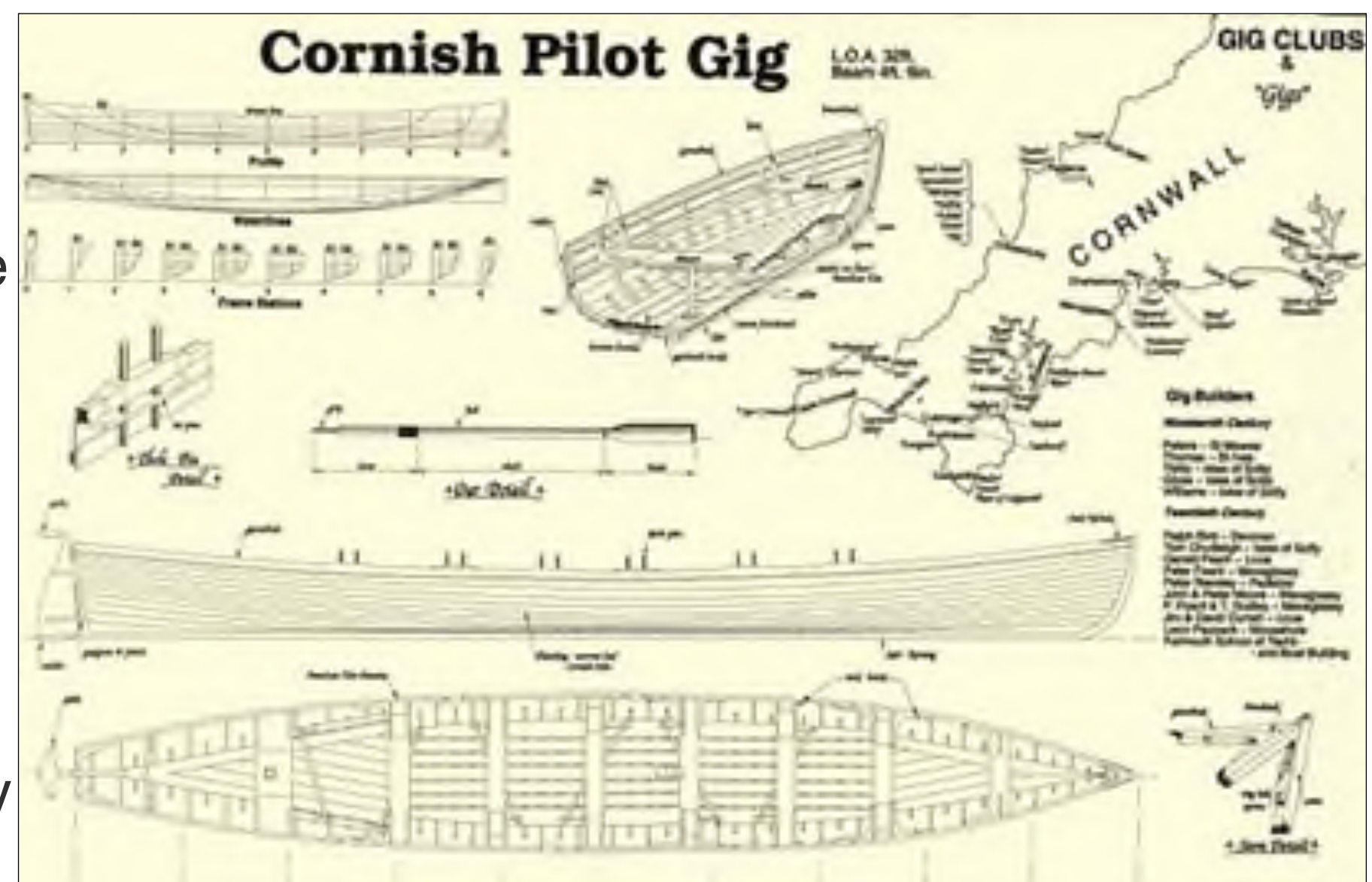
Racing for pleasure seems to have run alongside the work ethic and is recorded in the *Western Morning News* as early as 1885, at a regatta held in Padstow. The principal event of the day saw a gig named *Tom Sawyer*, from Port Isaac beating Padstow's boat, *Constance*, by one minute, winning a £3 prize.

Nowadays, pilot gigs are used primarily for sport. There are clubs on the north coast as far as Wales and on the south reaching the Solent; and a long history of pilot gigs in the Isles of Scilly. Abroad there are clubs in France, Holland, the Faroe Islands, Australia and America.

All modern racing gigs are based on the boat *Treffry*, built in 1838 by William Peters of St Mawes, for Newquay. It's a testament to this boatbuilder's skill that this very same gig is still owned and raced by Newquay Rowing Club. Each new boat is inspected to check it confirms to rigorous specifications. This ensures that all boats racing are of an equal standard. The monitoring of each build is carried out by an appointed officer of the **Cornish Pilot Gig Association**, the governing body for the sport.

Competitions are held all around the Cornish coast each summer with one of the most popular in the Isles of Scilly, over the May Day Bank Holiday. It's organised by the World Pilot Gig Championship Committee. Last year's event saw over 140 gigs from more than 60 clubs competing. In fact, pilot gig racing is one of the fastest growing sports in the UK.

The culmination of the season's competitions is the County Championship hosted by Newquay Rowing Club. It's held over two weekends, one for the ladies and, two weeks later, for the men. There are other significant events too: juniors and teenagers, in two categories; under 14s and under 16s, have their own championship, so do veterans; competitors over the age of 40. Some regattas have a separate race for rowers of 50 years plus. In between these fixtures, many clubs hold their own race days, which are colourful, exciting and competitive, whilst helping to raise essential money to maintain the boats and other running costs. Many clubs also raise thousands of pounds each year for charity.



two gigs tow a vessel out past Castle Rock, Port Gaverne

