

Shipbuilding at Pill Mawr & Pillgwenlly, Newport in the 18th Century: A Maritime Legacy



1. The Rise of Newport's Shipbuilding Industry

The 18th century marked a transformative era for Newport's shipbuilding, particularly in the riverfront communities of **Pill Mawr** and **Pillgwenlly**. Located along the River Usk, these areas became centres for constructing **sloops, brigs, and smacks**, enabling trade with **Bristol, Ireland**, and beyond.

Key Drivers of Growth:

- **Abundant oak timber** from the **Llanvihangel** and **Malpas** areas, as highlighted by a remarkable **April 1785 auction** offering "*One Thousand remarkably fine OAK TREES... within one mile of Park-y-Pill, on the River Ulk [Usk].*"
- **Park-y-Pill** provided an ideal riverside site just two miles from Newport, with established shipbuilding credentials and easy access to road transport.
- Timber agents **William Kemeys** (Newport) and **Henry Phillips** (Llantarnam) connected woodland estates—such as those owned by the **Tredegar family**—to shipbuilders. The Tredegar family financed vessels including the *Tredegar Boat* (40-ton smack) and *Moderator* (53-ton sloop, 1778).
- Shipyards were family-run ventures, like **Timothy Sparkes** and **R. Griffiths & Son**, predating the larger Tredegar Wharf Company (established 1807).

- Expanding trade routes, especially in **coal and iron exports**, spurred demand for locally built vessels.

The 1785 notice also gives insight into timber logistics—trees were marked with white lead and oil (No. 1 to No. 1000), with site inspections arranged through Kemeys or Phillips.

2. Shipbuilding Practices and Key Vessels

Construction Techniques:

- Ships were built on **tidal stocks** along the Usk, employing **clinker** (lapstrake) and **carvel** construction methods.
- A skilled workforce—**carpenters, blacksmiths, ropemakers**—produced a diverse fleet that included merchant and wartime vessels.

Notable Examples:

- *Tredegar* (1787), a locally built sloop.
- *Moderator* (1778), a sloop marking early Tredegar investment.
- *Joseph and Fanny* (1824, 122 tons), reflecting growth in vessel size.
- Privateering during conflicts (e.g., the **War of Austrian Succession**) increased demand for durable, fast ships, although Newport mainly produced merchant vessels.

3. Economic Impact and Trade Networks

Newport's wooden ships were essential for:

- **Coal, iron, and oak bark** exports to **Bristol and Ireland**.
- Routine **Bristol Channel trade**, with ships like the *Tredegar Boat* and *Moderator* carrying corn, poultry, and passengers.
- Later international expansion, as seen with the *Florist* (443-ton barque, 1838) which reached the **Mediterranean and West Indies**.

The opening of the **Monmouthshire Canal** in 1796 further boosted trade while gradually shifting focus from traditional yards like Pill Mawr toward more industrialised docks.

4. Shipbuilders and Shipyards

The 1785 timber notice affirms **Park-y-Pill** as a working shipyard, with ready-built vessels and purpose-prepared land for timber storage.

Prominent Shipbuilders:

- **Timothy Sparkes**, early 18th century yard operator.
- **R. Griffiths & Son**, his successors.
- **Matthew & John Johns, David Tudor, and Pride & Williams**, who carried the tradition into the 19th century, producing vessels like *Joseph and Fanny* and *St. Pierre* (Newport's first steamship, 1825).

These shipyards benefited from the close proximity of quality oak, with forests located no more than four miles from Newport.

5. Decline and Enduring Legacy

By the mid-19th century, the local shipbuilding industry faced a decline due to:

- **Oak depletion** from decades of intensive use.
- Rising **steamship competition**, including iron-hulled vessels.
- Broader **industrial shifts** that favoured larger commercial docks over family-run operations.

Yet the legacy remains:

- The discovery of the **Newport Ship** (a 15th-century vessel) in 2002 reignited interest in the region's maritime past.
- Archival sources like the **1785 timber auction notice** offer rare insight into how timber supply chains underpinned a thriving shipbuilding economy.

Conclusion

The **1785 timber auction notice** is a valuable primary source that:

1. Reveals the large-scale timber demand (1,000 oak trees).
2. Demonstrates sophisticated logistics, with marked trees and local viewing agents.
3. Confirms **Park-y-Pill** as a construction hub.
4. Reflects a deeply interconnected system linking Newport's shipyards with Monmouthshire's woodland estates.

This episode in Newport's history offers a vivid case study of how local resources, skilled labour, and regional trade shaped an enduring maritime legacy.

<https://tinyurl.com/Pill-Mawr-Shipyard>

