

Ship and Boat building - An overview

1. There was shipbuilding in Littlehampton on the East bank in the late eighteenth century with both the Isemonger family and Carver. They are believed to have constructed small warships (sloops) for the Navy during the Napoleonic wars (1803-1815).
2. Various members of the Isemonger family continued to operate until about 1855 but moved progressively into shipping. Corney and Carver were operating together from about the turn of the century, until about 1847. There were related trades such as blacksmiths and retailers of shipboard equipment (chandlers) also on the East bank (including eventually Ockenden)
3. Stephen Olliver opened a shipyard, sawmill and rope works on the West bank from about 1837 (the chain ferry opened in 1825). Olliver's slip was particularly large and boasted a steam winch to haul boats up, but on the other hand the yard flooded in the highest tides.
4. Henry Harvey, a boat builder from Rye, bought Olliver's shipyard around 1846 with his first boat coming off in 1848. The firm built three-masted schooners and other largeish wooden craft and they sometimes also took part shares in ships they had built. Henry's sons John and William ran the yard from the 1860s. The demand for the wooden ships dropped off during the late 1870s, after which the yard concentrated on repair work and building Thames sailing barges. As the tourism industry built up they would time the launching of a hull to coincide with a public event, such as a regatta or carnival. Note: you have to be careful launching a ship across the river, if it comes down the slip too fast it will hit the far bank!
It is suggested that John Harvey gave up the firm in 1916 and it was bought by a company that retained the Harvey name, but then went bust in 1923.
5. David Hillyard served an apprenticeship as a boat builder in Essex and came to Littlehampton in 1906 to work for a local boatbuilder who soon went bust. Hillyard set up his own yard on the East bank and initially made dinghies. During WWI he made lighters and whalers for the navy. Next to him on that bank was Hubert Williams who made the hulls for the Norman Thompson flying boats (the Museum has some nice pictures of flying boats on the river). When the war was over, there was no more demand for flying boats and Williams went out of business. Hillyard started developing his own yachts. Harvey's yard was put up for auction in 1923, Hillyard bought the central part of it and moved across the river. Hillyard's closed in 2009 but about 700 of his boats are estimated to be still afloat.

6. William Osborne came to Littlehampton in 1919 from a background of running a bespoke coachworks in London. They started producing motor yachts, some of significant size, on the East bank. But they did take part of Harvey's yard on the West bank as well in 1924. In WWII they produced Fairmile motor gunboats for the Navy as well as landing craft, high speed motorboats and police launches. After the war they returned to luxury motorboats, and developed the 'Pacific' work boat. They moved progressively into lifeboats at the same time and supplied about 100 to the RNLI over a 50 year period. They started using synthetic materials from about 1970. They apparently ceased business in 2000.

Research materials

The above comes from:

Victoria County History: Littlehampton (2009)

Walton, Belchamber & Twinn (2022) Littlehampton 1800-1940

Morris, Jeff (1997) The Story of Littlehampton Lifeboats, RNLI

Gray, Nicholas (2021) David Hillyard -the man and his boats.

Gwen Eggleton put together a collection of personal reminiscences in Littlehampton Harbour 1071-2003, including comments from people who worked at Osborne's.

See more in our Maritime Gallery!