

Minstrel

Biography of a Sailing Ship

by Jonathan Hooton

Synopsis: The Minstrel traded during the second half of the 19th century and into the next, visiting Blakeney and other ports along the North Norfolk coast. Here the wealth of information about the schooner is reviewed, from voyages along the coast and overseas to the people who built, owned and sailed her.

Among the photographs of Blakeney quay that survive from the end of the 19th century, there are several that include the topsail schooner *Minstrel*. In addition a photograph of a ship painting of her and a two dimensional image of her being constructed also survive. The existence of a good photographic record, plus the fact that she traded from all of the North Norfolk ports for more than 50 years made the *Minstrel* a suitable subject for further research.

She was built at Wells and although in the 1840s and 50s, there was a trend to invest in bigger vessels, intended for the deep-sea trade, the majority of vessels built were sloops and schooners of between 50 and 100 tons. The *Minstrel* was typically one of these vessels that formed the backbone of the trade of Wells. Built in 1847, she was able to partake in the height of the 19th century trade, and, lasting until 1904, she also saw the decline.

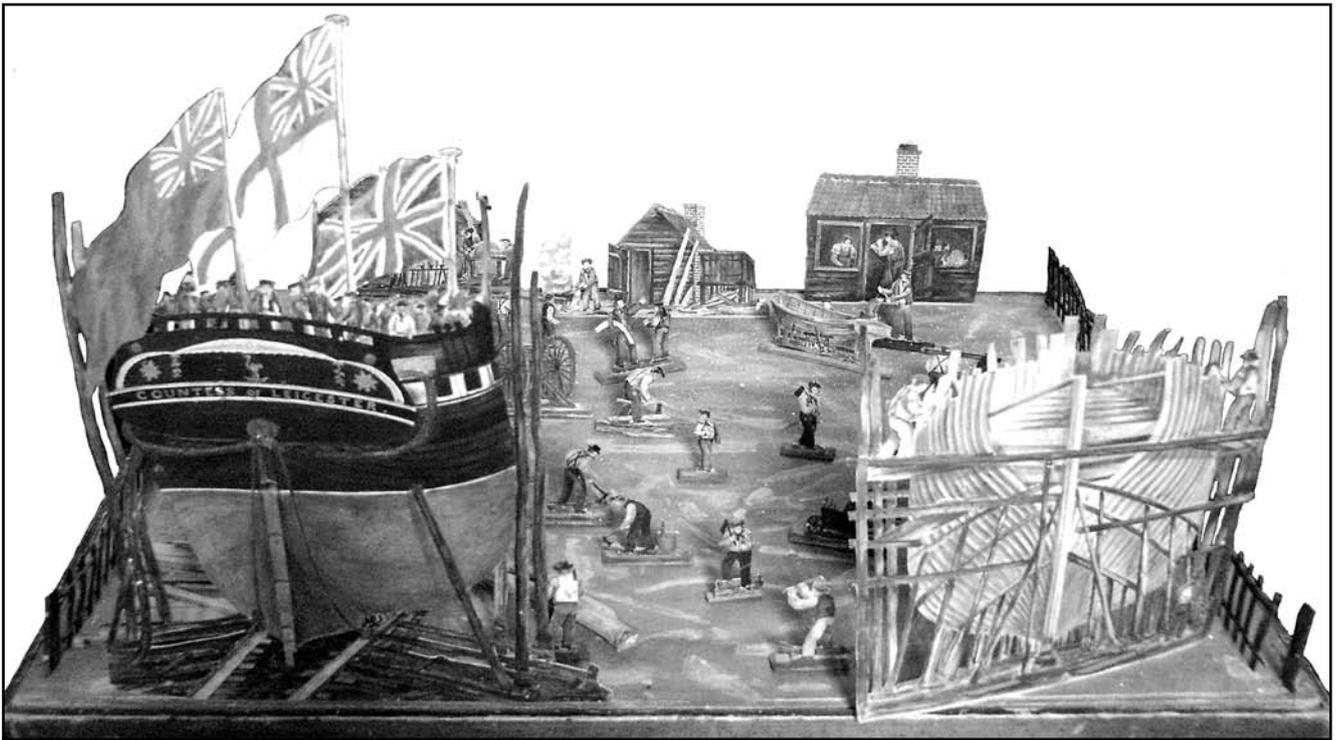
Early History

There were two shipyards in Wells at that time, John Lubbock's and Henry Tyrrell's and the *Minstrel* was built at the latter's yard at the East End, just past Jolly Sailor's Yard. The launch was recorded by the Norfolk Chronicle, which stated "Yesterday afternoon (25th August) at six o'clock, a very pretty schooner called the *Minstrel* was launched from Mr H T Tyrrell's shipyard. She is the property of T T Mack Esq. of Burnham."¹ A few months earlier, in April 1847, Tyrrell had launched the *Countess of Leicester*, the largest vessel to be built at Wells to that date and described as "a splendid brig" and "the finest specimen of shipbuilding ever constructed at Wells."² The event was also recorded, probably by Tyrrell himself, in a two dimensional 'model', consisting of a series of cut-outs mounted on a square base-board. The relevance of this to the *Minstrel* is that her construction was well underway by the

time that the *Countess of Leicester* was being launched and she must be the vessel shown in the model under construction next to the *Countess of Leicester*. She is shown stern on with the hull ready for planking.³ To have such a representation is very rare and this coupled with the photographs of *Minstrel* towards the end of her career, make her pictorially, very well documented for a small coasting vessel.

Charles Claxton was the surveying officer at Wells in 1847 when the *Minstrel* was registered on 4th September. She was the seventeenth vessel registered that year, bearing in mind that the figure also included vessels registered at Cley. Eight of these were small fishing craft built at Sheringham, Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft and Ludham; four were larger vessels built elsewhere, bought second hand and re-registered at Wells, and four had been built at Wells that year. In addition to the 151 ton *Countess of Leicester*, Tyrrell had also built and launched the 95 ton schooner *Teazer* also registered in April 1847. During the same period John Lubbock had built the schooners *Sydney Claude* (84 tons, registered in February) and *Edward Coke* (87 tons, registered in August) indicating a prosperous period for the Wells shipbuilders.

The *Minstrel* was registered at 59 tons, had two masts and her measurements were; length 57.3 feet, breadth 15.3 feet and depth 8.4 feet. She had a graceful square stern, was carvel built (i.e. the planking was laid flush and not overlapping) and had a scroll rather than a figurehead. She was entirely owned by Thomas Thirtle Mack of Burnham Thorpe.⁴ Her master, Henry Howell, also came from Burnham Thorpe. Thomas Mack was described as a ship owner in the registers, which he was, but in previous entries he had just been described as a merchant. He obviously knew and trusted Henry Tyrrell, since, along with John Savory and James Smith of Burnham Overy, he had invested in a third (21 shares) of another of Tyrrell's ships, the 51 ton sloop *Hopewell*, built a year



Photograph 1. The Countess of Leicester about to be launched in 1847 with Minstrel under construction at Tyrrell's shipyard from a model owned by Tom Dack of Wells.

earlier. He was obviously happy with his investment, for as well as financing the whole of the *Minstrel*, he also took eight shares in the *Countess of Leicester*.

Burnham had long been a creek of Wells and under its jurisdiction. The vessels traded from Burnham Overy Staith. Although never as important as Wells there was a steady trade during the first half of the 19th century. White's Directory of 1845 describes Overy Creek as "navigable for vessels of 60 or 80 tons up to the Staith, where the spring-tides rise 9 or 10 feet, and where a considerable trade in Coal and corn is carried on, as well as in oysters, of which there is an excellent bed in the offing, where 5 boats and 15 fishermen are regularly employed."⁵ Mack and Wiseman were corn and coal merchants based at Burnham Overy and it is likely that both the *Hopewell* (which was part owned by John Savory, miller & maltster in Burnham Overy and later owner of the *Minstrel*) and the *Minstrel* were built in order to control the shipping of their produce. Although the *Minstrel* was primarily involved in trading from Burnham there was a constant interplay between Wells and all of the north Norfolk harbours and the *Minstrel* would have taken cargoes to and from Wells when not needed at Burnham.

Throughout the eighteenth century it was commonplace for proud masters or owners to purchase a painting of their vessel from one of the artists in the major ports who earned a living by faithfully reproducing ships. The *Minstrel*

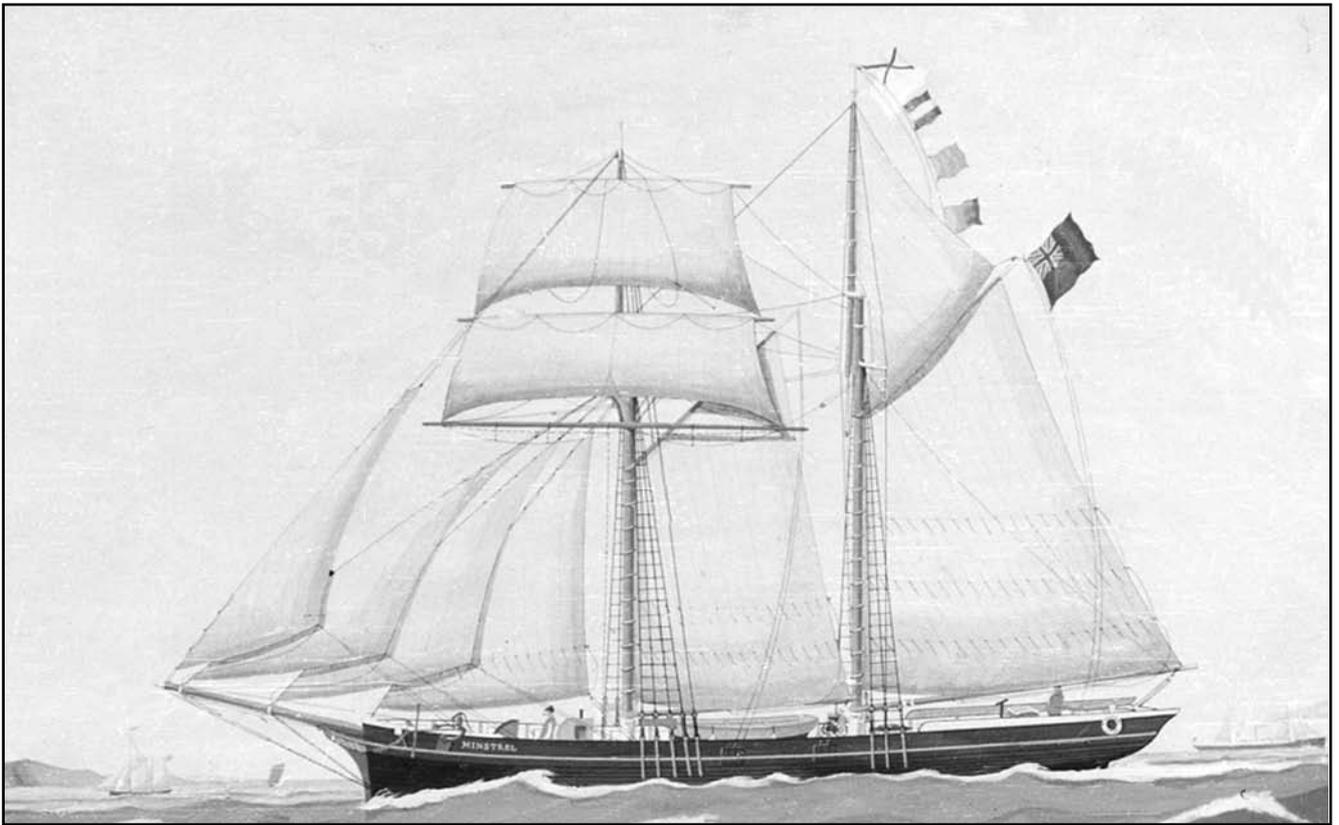
was no exception. Most of the photographs of the vessels were taken in port and the advantage that the ship portraits have is that they show the vessel under sail. By looking at the painting of *Minstrel* on page 6, the two square sails on her mainmast show that she was a top-sail schooner. Two crewmen are shown on deck. However, the shipping registers, record that she was crewed by four men, a fact confirmed by the crew agreements. Strangely, her code flag hoist, used to identify the vessel, which was given as NFKL by the Mercantile Navy List for 1867, does not agree with the flags shown in the painting. She was a fine looking vessel, and the scroll figurehead and her elegant stern are clearly displayed.

Trading - Overseas

Although primarily involved in the coasting trade, the *Minstrel* did occasionally go overseas as the Crew Agreement for 1863 indicates. On 2nd May of that year she left Hartlepool for Hamburg leaving that port on the 18th to return to Burnham. Later that year she sailed from Hartlepool to Memel (Klaipeda, in present day Lithuania) arriving on 20th June and departing for Britain (probably Blakeney) ten days later. Although no British destination was given, the crew was discharged at Blakeney on 7th August. The Blakeney Harbour Account Book for August 1863 records the *Minstrel* as paying harbour dues of 7s 3d. Since this was charged at a pennyha'penny a ton, this indicates



Photograph 2. The Minstrel at Blakeney Quay c1900.



Photograph 3. Photograph of a ship painting of *Minstrel*, also in 'The Glaven Ports' J J Hooton 1996 p 208.

the vessel was 58 tons, thereby confirming it to be the *Minstrel*. Also recorded were import dues of 2s 4d. In September, she repeated the trip arriving in Memel on 16th September and again staying ten days before returning probably to Wells, where the crew were discharged on 22nd October.⁶

Crew

The crew were all from Burnham. They were, Henry Howell, master, 44 years of age, William Smith, mate, 26 years of age, Joseph Scoles, seaman, 23 years of age and Henry Howell jnr., cook, who was just 21. Their wages for the foreign voyages are recorded and are as follows. William Smith, the mate, received £3-10s and Joseph Scoles, seaman got £2-15s. The new apprentice, Henry Howell jnr. only received £1-15s, although he must have discharged his duties creditably because on the second trip to Memel his wages rose by twenty five percent, to £2-00.⁶ The *Minstrel* also made nine other coastal voyages that year, all but one starting from Burnham and visited Hartlepool four times and Newcastle once. She was probably carrying grain north and coal southwards. The crew joined the ship on 1st May at Hartlepool, which suggests that she may have overwintered there or at another northern port. After the first voyage to Memel the crew were discharged at Blakeney, whereas after the sec-

ond trip it was Wells. At the end of the year the crew agreement states that all four men were continuing with the vessel and the completed Agreement was delivered to Wells on the 12th January 1864.⁷

Changing Ownership and Registration

During 1864 the ownership of the *Minstrel* changed hands, although it little affected the crew or the trading pattern. On 23rd August, the owner, Thomas Thirtle Mack, sold 32 shares to his fellow Burnham merchant, John Savory, and 32 shares to Henry Howell, the master.⁸ Howell was 45 at this time and when the next transaction took place in 1891, when he relinquished his shares he would have been 72. However, they may have passed to his son, also Henry Howell. In the same year, the *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette*, the *Minstrel* is recorded arriving at Newcastle from Wells on 24th January.

In 1869 the *Minstrel* was re-registered at the Port of Wells (3/1869, i.e. the third registration of that year) and it is not clear why.⁹ When she was first registered in 1847 by Charles Claxton, the surveying officer at Wells, her tonnage was given as 58 2087/3500. The measurement of tonnage had always been a difficult question and the *Minstrel's* tonnage was calculated under the 'New Measurement Rule' which became law in 1836, superseding the rather crude way of

estimating tonnage before that date, that came to be known as the 'Old Measurement'. Prior to 1836 only two measurements (length and breadth) were taken; the depth was assumed to be half the breadth. These figures were then multiplied together and the resultant figure was divided by 94 to give the ships register tonnage. This was clearly an inaccurate measurement and in 1821 the government appointed a Commission to hold an inquiry. Nothing conclusive resulted from this and it was not until a second Commission was appointed in 1833 that a new method for measuring tonnage was recommended. This involved a more complex calculation based on three cross-sectional measurements of the hull. This time the product of these new measurements was divided by 3,500, leading to the awkward fraction of 2087/3500 in the *Minstrel's* case.¹⁰

The new measurement, which applied to the *Minstrel*, although an improvement on what had gone before, was still not without its problems. Shipbuilders found that a shallower and longer hull allowed the same amount of cargo to be carried but with a reduced figure for register tonnage under the new rules. In 1849 this resulted in a third commission being appointed to find a more satisfactory way of measuring tonnage. Their conclusions were made law in the Merchant Shipping Act of 1854.¹⁰ This time more complex measurements were taken and the final calculation was divided by 100, and this time there was no great financial benefit in having a ship re-registered if there had been no substantial alterations. Therefore it is not apparent why *Minstrel* was re-registered on 16th September 1869, indeed, the register tonnage increased (Table 2).

Ship	Registration	Old Tonnage (pre 1836)	New Tonnage (post 1836)
Ann	5/1836	86 58/94	73 2225/3500
Lady Anne	8/1836	118 23/94	110 1215/3500
Ouse	10/1836	123 47/94	111 33/3500
Albion	14/1836	47 50/94	35 1453/3500
Trial	15/1836	63 53/94	50 2942/3500
Hopewell	20/1836	103 52/94	86 2730/3500
Endeavour	21/1836	57 67/94	40 1469/3500
Huntsman	22/1836	31 86/94	21 2490/3500

Table 1.

Existing ships did not need to be re-measured unless extensive alterations to the hull had been made or the owner had requested it. However, it did not take the owners and masters long before they realised that the new and more accurate measurement reduced the register tonnage of their ship (Table 1). The register tonnage was the official figure on which harbour dues and pilotage was assessed. Therefore if the register tonnage could be reduced there was a saving in running costs whilst still having the same space for cargo. This led to a spate of ships

The changes in length and breadth are less likely to have resulted from a rebuild as reflecting the different measurements taken in the 1854 Act.

However, a clue may be found in the difference between the gross tonnage and the register tonnage. Five tons had been deducted from the gross figure for crew space. The 1854 Act exempted crew accommodation above the tonnage deck. In effect this meant that crew accommodation was placed above the deck in the fore-castle or a deckhouse so that there was no taxa-

Year	Gross Tonnage	Length	Breadth	Depth
1847	58 2087/3500	57 3/10	15 3/10	8 4/10
1869	65 73/100	69 2/10	17 6/10	8 4/10

Table 2.

being re-registered at Wells in 1836. A selection of the vessels that were re-registered with the change in their tonnage illustrates how the two measurements differed.¹¹

ble space below that could not be used for carrying cargo. But in 1867 a new law came into effect allowing crew accommodation, wherever it was situated, to be deducted from the gross tonnage



Photograph 4. Minstrel at Wells c1895.

figure. In the *Minstrel's* case this deduction made a register tonnage of 60 tons, only one ton more than the measurement under the old rule. Did this mean that the crew now had more comfortable quarters below deck? None of the existing photographs show any substantial deck housing.

Whatever the reason for the re-registration in 1869 the tonnage was altered again less than 10 years later. In 1878 she was in Yarmouth and being inspected by a Board of Trade Surveyor. The result was an increase in register tonnage summed up by the following letter sent by the Collector of Customs in Yarmouth to the Custom House at Wells, dated 19th July 1878.⁹

"Dear Sir,

I beg to forward Board of Trade Surveyor's certificate disallowing the 5 tons for crew space from the Register Tonnage of the Minstrel of your Port, official No. 21217, and to acquaint you that the necessary alterations have been made on the Vessels' Certificate of registry"

From then onwards the *Minstrel* is recorded as being of 65 tons although a further note in 1886 reads "gross tonnage altered from 65 to 66" although this never seems to have been recorded in port records.¹²

During this period the *Minstrel* would still be engaged largely in exporting grain from John Savory's granaries in Burnham and returning

with coal from the north and when not needed in Burnham she would be visiting other ports along the north Norfolk coast, involved in a similar trade. There must have still been a meagre profit involved despite the continuing competition from the railways that was leading to an irreversible decline in the cargoes shipped from the north Norfolk ports.

The *Minstrel* had always been a family concern and for 44 years had been skippered by two masters, Henry Howell senior and junior. She had always been a very reliable vessel. But in 1891 Henry Howell decided to sell his half share in the *Minstrel*. John Savory obviously still had faith in the vessel, for on 9th December 1891 he bought 16 shares from Henry Howell, increasing his share of the ownership to 48 shares. William Temple, her new master, bought the other 16 shares. Temple had been born in Wells in 1852, making him 39 by the time he bought a quarter share in her. He had already been in charge for at least 4 months prior to the purchase since the Wells Harbour Records show that she arrived 'light' from Burnham on 26th September 1891 before departing on 5th October for Newcastle laden with malt with William Temple as her master. She was back in Wells with coals from Shields on 19th October. She did not sail again until after the change in ownership when she left Wells once more on 13th December for Blakeney.

Voyages

She appears another 8 times in the Wells Harbour Records between 1892-94 and once again in 1897, carrying coals, seed cake or barley, sailing from Wells to Hull, Sunderland and Shields in the north and Burnham and Blakeney on the Norfolk coast.¹³

However, by the close of the 19th century the trading pattern had begun to change. The terminal decline which was now gripping the harbours of north Norfolk meant that there was not enough trade to keep the *Minstrel* permanently employed and she had to go looking for trade wherever it occurred along the east and south coasts.

This is illustrated by the Account of Voyages and Crew for 1901 (Table 3). Of the eighteen journeys recorded, only four, all to Blakeney, were in Norfolk. She left Blakeney on 28th April and did not return for the rest of the year.

Southampton for somewhere else, but encountered difficulties and had to return to the nearest port. This may account for the long period of rest at Cowes where temporary repairs made the journey back up north possible. Another curiosity about the account is why, earlier in the year, it took a month to get from Sunderland to Blakeney (23rd March – 21st April) even if the winds were unfavourable.¹⁴

In the account of the first half of the year William Temple is described as being from Wells but from Blakeney for the second six months. Whichever place he considered to be home, he saw very little of his native Norfolk now that the *Minstrel* had to sail the south and east coasts of Britain to search for cargoes.

The nature of the crew had changed too. Whereas in 1863 the crew remained the same all year and were all from Burnham, including a father and son, by 1901, only William Temple

Account of Voyages 1901

Departed	Port	Arrived	Port
18th February	Bridlington	18th February	Hull
21st February	Hull	22nd February	Blakeney
10th March	Blakeney	14th March	Sunderland
23rd March	Sunderland	21st April	Blakeney
28th April	Blakeney	29th April	Grimsby
2nd May	Grimsby	10th May	London
26th May	London	29th May	Yarmouth
3rd June	Yarmouth	3rd June	Orford
6th June	Orford	12th June	Grimsby
29th June	Grimsby	29th June	Hull
10th July	Hull	15th July	Leigh
22nd July	Leigh	22nd July	Gravesend
28th July	Gravesend	31st July	Hull
16th August	Hull	19th August	Bradwell
31st August	Bradwell	2nd September	London
11th September	London	15th September	Southampton
16th September	Southampton	17th September	Cowes
29th October	Cowes	10th November	Hull

Table 3.

As can be seen from the table she ranged from Sunderland in the north round to Cowes and Southampton in the south. After 28th April she made 13 more journeys, none of them to Norfolk. From 20th November until the end of the year, she was laid up in Wintringham, on the Humber, for repairs. The *Minstrel* had begun the year laid up at Bridlington before sailing to Hull on 18th February to collect a cargo for Blakeney. Since it took a day to sail from Southampton to Cowes (a distance of only 10 miles), and then *Minstrel* stayed in Cowes for nearly six weeks, it is possible that she left

came from Norfolk. For the first half of the year, the crew, James Eccles (mate), S. Koski (ordinary seaman) and William Robson (cook) all joined the ship in Hull and came from Selby, Finland and London respectively. They were discharged after the first six months and replaced with Victor Belmont (mate), born in Weston Point, South America, Ralph Cragg (able seaman), born in Stratford and Charles Glasby (ordinary seaman), born in London. Charles Glasby left the ship in London on 9th September and was replaced by George Price (cook), from Cardiff, a seventeen year old on his first ship.



Photograph 5. The *Minstrel* seen at the quay from the High Street Blakeney – From ‘The Glaven Ports’ J J Hooton 1996 p208.

Two of the crew were discharged in Hull whilst Belmont helped Temple sail the ship to Wintringham where Belmont was discharged. Only William Temple was recorded as staying with his ship.¹⁴

The End

By 1904 the *Minstrel* was in an impressive fifty-seventh year of service. Occasionally visiting Blakeney, for William Temple was now in Morston, she was more frequently forced to go further afield for employment. Such was the case for her last voyage. She left Woolwich in February 1904 bound for York with a cargo of government stores. On 17th February she became stranded and lost in a Force 7 easterly gale at Chapel Point, near Chapel St. Leonard’s in Lincolnshire (53° 13’ 45” N, 00° 20’ 30” E).¹⁵ The crew must have got off but it was not thought worth attempting to repair the 57 year old vessel. A note in the registers records “Registry closed 28th November 1904. Advice from M. O. (managing owner) that ship stranded at Chapel, Lincs. She was broken up there in May 1904 by J. J. Simons of Sutton, Lincs., who declares that he destroyed the certificate of

Registry.” The certificate had not been destroyed as a footnote records that “Certificate recd Coastguard, Chapel, Linc.; cancelled and forwarded to Reg. Genl. 19/12/04.”¹⁶

So ended the *Minstrel*, a regular visitor to all the north Norfolk ports for over 50 years. William Temple went on to become master of the ketch *Admiral Mitford*. Rumour had it that he became famous for sailing her single handed up to the north-east and then returning to the Haven. Here, according to Sam Parsons, he would moor and begin selling coal out of the ship. And there he stayed until all the coal was sold, being a frequent visitor to the quayside pubs. It was during one of these lengthy sojourns that Sam Parsons cousin, Billy Holmes was alleged to have gone aboard and stolen money from the *Admiral Mitford*. The case was brought to court, but as Sam Parsons relates, the local merchant Gus Hill stood up for Holmes and the case was dismissed. Billy Temple felt that Holmes was guilty and in protest refused to drink in Morston again, instead confining his custom to the Blakeney pubs. Sam also said that he was master of the *Reaper*, as well as the *Minstrel* and the *Admiral Mitford*.¹⁷

Conclusion

The *Minstrel* was typical of the ships that provided the bread and butter trade of the Norfolk ports. She went abroad in her earlier years but the bulk of her trade consisted in travelling between Norfolk and the north-east

before having to sail the east and south coasts, being taken wherever the trade was at the end of her life. As the photographs show, she was a handsome ship and also a very safe and reliable one that gave 57 years of profitable service to her owners.

References

- 1 *Norfolk Chronicle* 28th August 1847
- 2 *Norfolk Chronicle* 24th April 1847
- 3 The model is owned by Tom Dack . For further information on the model, see Stammers, M. K. "A 19th Century Shipyard model from Wells-next-the -Sea" in *Norfolk Archaeology* Vol. XLII part IV pp 519-596
- 4 NRO Shipping Registers P/SH/L/10 17/1847
- 5 *White's Directory of Norfolk* 1845 pp 662-3
- 6 Account of Voyage and Crew (Foreign going ship) 1863, Maritime History Archive, Memorial University of Newfoundland
- 7 Account of Voyage and Crew of the Home Trade 1863, Maritime History Archive, Memorial University of Newfoundland
- 8 NRO P/SH/L/9 Transactions
- 9 NRO P/SH/L/8 3/1869
- 10 MacGregor D R (1973) *Fast Sailing Ships, their design and Construction* Conway London
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- 13 Wells Harbour Records
- 14 Official Log Book and Account of Voyages and Crew 1901 Maritime History Archive, Memorial University of Newfoundland
- 15 Larn, R & B, (1995-2003) *Shipwreck Index of the British Isles* Vol. 3 Lloyd's Register of Shipping, London
- 16 NRO P/SH/L/8
- 17 Taped conversation of Sam Parsons with Godfrey Sayers