

Part 3.

Devonport

In the early 1800s Britain was still at war with Napoleon. Although British sea power had been dominant since Trafalgar, the French Navy still remained a threat, while deteriorating relationships with the United States ended in war in 1812. In Devonport there was a sudden surge in shipbuilding about 1809. In the previous eight years only three ships had been built - yet one was completed each year between 1810 and 1812, and no less than three in 1813.

Maybe there were recruiting drives that lured the young men of Devon to the dockyards of the south. They probably needed very little encouragement. Quite apart from regular work and regular pay, the attraction of the city would be great for a country boy. Richard Vanstone would have been 20 when the shipbuilding boom began - he became a sawyer. It seems very likely that he was carrying or sawing timbers for most, if not all of these five vessels - the Union (1811), Narcissus (1812), Creole (1813), Jupiter (1813) and Rennie (1813).



An 18th century sawyer



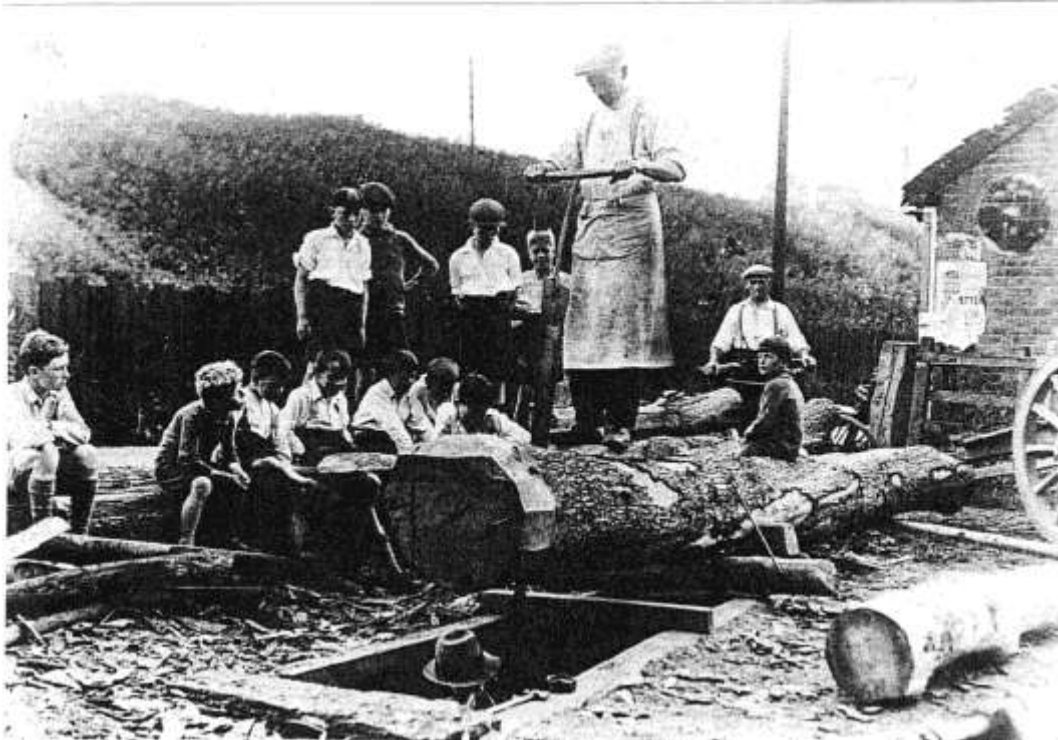
An early 19th century shipwright

Although Richard doubtless owed his recruitment to the war with France, he probably gave it little thought at the time. In 1812, however, he undoubtedly saw the French prisoners who were daily brought out of prison, chained, to work in the dockyard. He would also have seen the *Bellerophon*, which in 1815 anchored for a while in Plymouth Sound, bearing the captive Napoleon to his final exile in St Helena.

The dockyard in which Richard spent most of his working life was begun in 1690. A second dry dock was built in 1727, a third in 1762, and a fourth, the huge New North Dock, in 1789. With the influx of workers to man these new docks, the town of Plymouth Dock grew rapidly. By 1801, when the first census was held, the population was already approaching that of Plymouth, and in another 20 years had 25,000 inhabitants to Plymouth's 21,500. The vast majority of these people were drawn from the villages of West Devon and East Cornwall.

In a village community the carpenter would choose and buy standing trees and they would be felled and brought to his yard to await the arrival of the sawyer. In the dockyard, wood was used in such quantity that the shipwrights could not themselves have gone far afield to choose trees for felling.

The yard most probably employed special buyers to visit estates and select suitable trees. When the tree trunks arrived at the yard (almost certainly by water) a skilled and exhausting job awaited the sawyers. First, they had to manoeuvre a tree-trunk into position over the sawpit, through the adept use of levers. Then, when sawing began, the top sawyer - the senior man - stood on the tree trunk, holding his end of the saw. The bottom sawyer in the pit underneath would usually wear a brimmed hat to keep the sawdust out of his eyes.



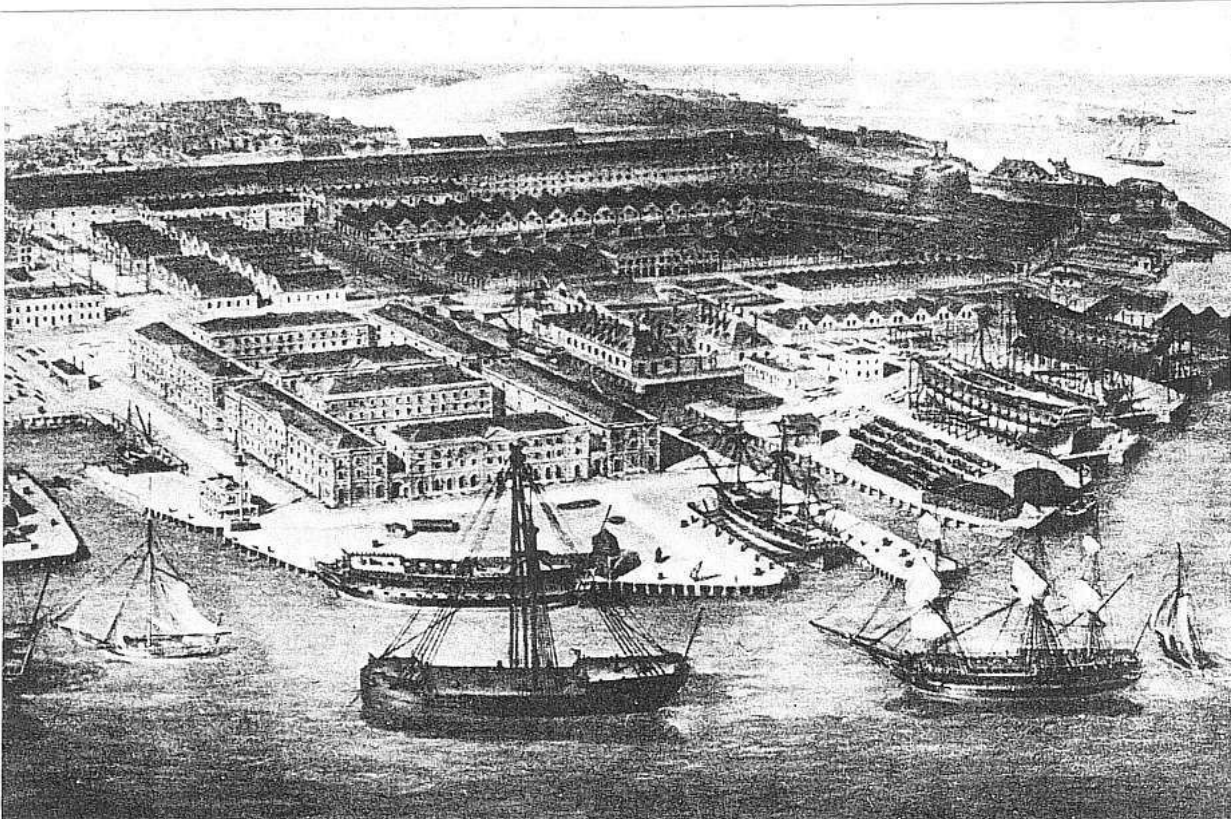
Sawyers at work. This photograph was taken in the 1920s but the method had not changed for centuries

Much of the sawyers' time was spent not in actual sawing, but in manoeuvring the timbers and setting and sharpening their saws. When the two sawyers had made several cuts along to the first supporting roller, the bottom sawyer would remove the bottom handle and the top sawyer would lift out the saw. Then the roller was moved, the saw re-inserted and the cuts continued. To prevent the plank ends vibrating as the cuts progressed, rope was wound round the ends and wedges cut in to steady them. Unlike modern steel saws, the iron saws blunted very quickly and needed frequent sharpening.

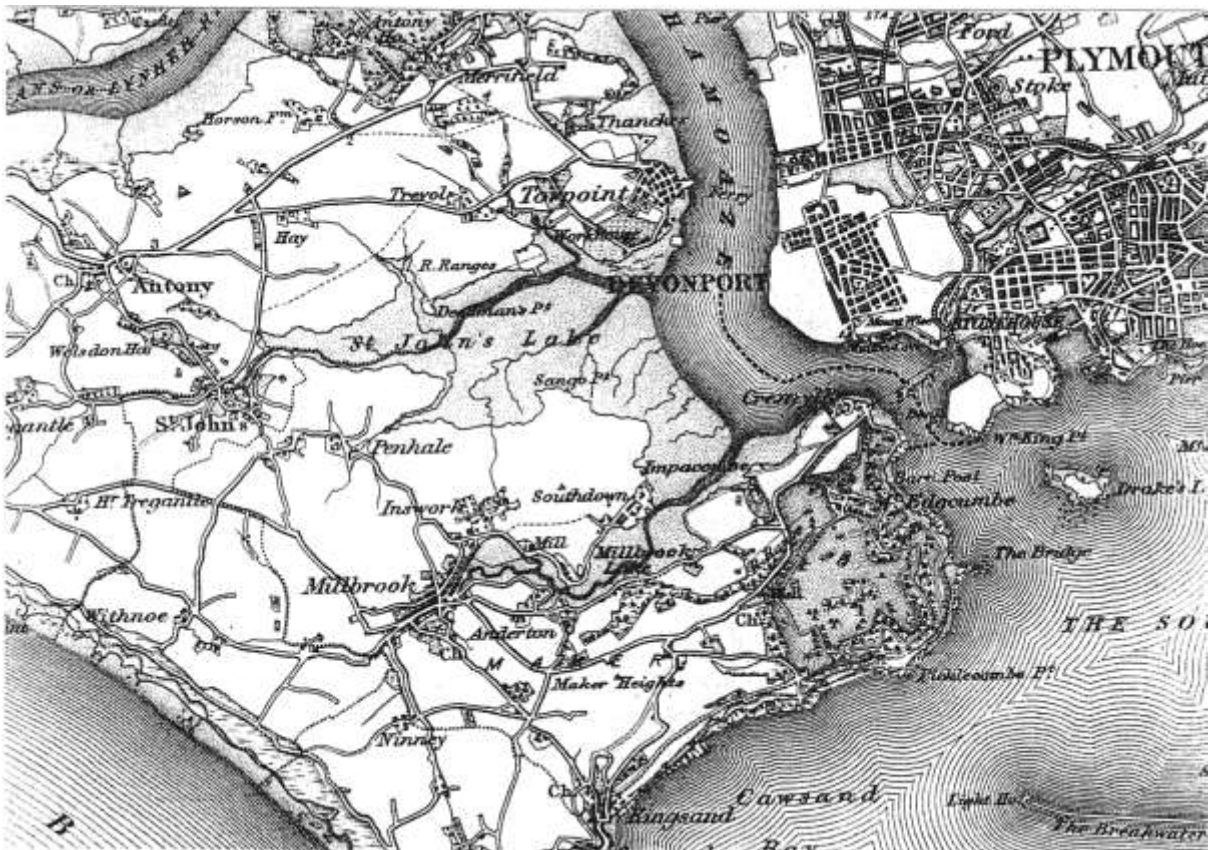
Eventually, the sawyers in the dockyard were displaced by steam-driven saws, but this was long after Richard's retirement. It seems incredible that so long after the invention of the steam engine, the dockyard remained unmechanised.

Hours of work were long - in winter from 6am to 6pm with one hour for dinner; in summer, from sunrise to sunset, with half an hour for breakfast and one and a half hours for dinner. While Richard worked in the dockyard, various adjustments were made to the working week. By 1855 the hours were fixed at 10 per day in summer and eight in winter. The eight hour day all the year round was not granted until 1894.

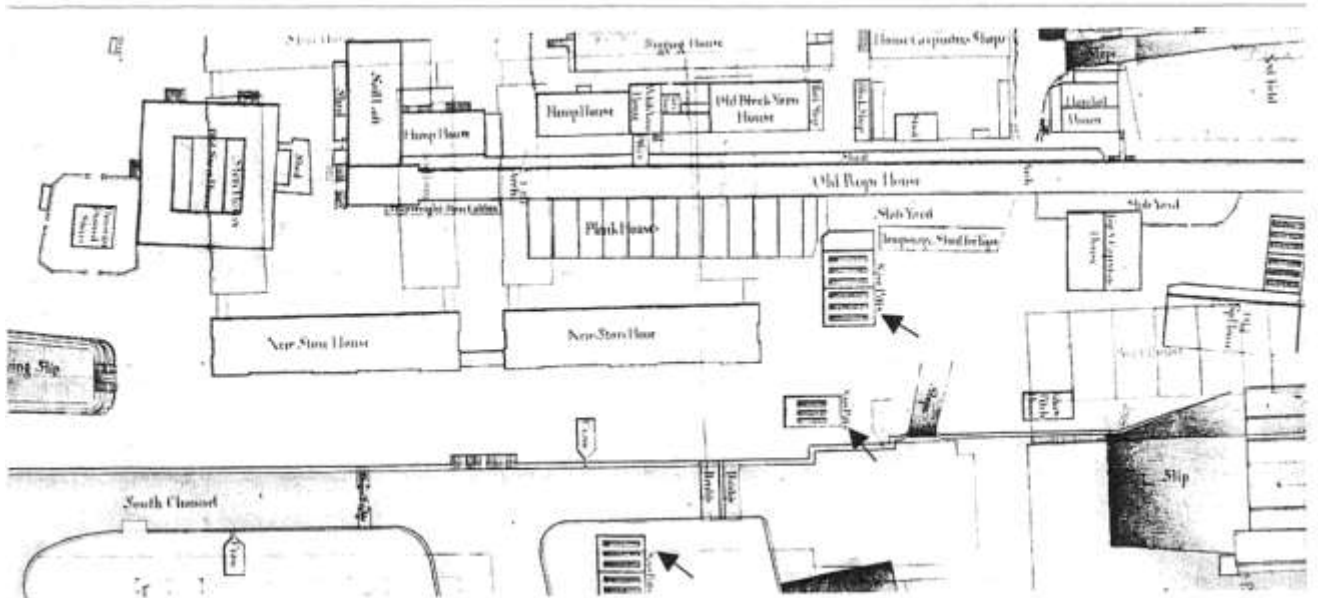
Though above the labourers, the sawyer was at the bottom of all the crafts in the dockyard. During most of the eighteenth century, plumbers received 2s 4d per day; shipwrights and caulkers 2s 1d; joiners 1s 6d; sailmakers 1s 10d; riggers and sawyers only 1s 1d. These rates of pay had an extraordinary length of life, being first instituted in 1650 and remaining unchanged until 1788. But even in 1811 Richard's wages would not have been much more.



Devonport dockyard in 1798



The Plymouth area in 1806 showing the three adjacent towns of Devonport, Stonehouse and Plymouth and the Torpoint and Cremyll ferries across to Cornwall.



Part of a plan of Devonport dockyard showing saw pits arrowed. Note their proximity to the water.



Fore Street, Devonport, in 1831 showing the entrance to the dockyard in the distance.

The method of paying wages in those days is almost unbelievable. Wages were paid quarterly and a quarter's pay was kept in hand, so that new workers had to wait six months for their first pay-packet. The pay was brought to the port by sea from London - a vital precaution because of the activities of highwaymen on the roads. When the time for the arrival of the frigate drew near, an anxious watch was kept on the approaches to the port, and at the first sighting of the vessel, the town and the yard went mad. Bells were pealed, and people danced in the streets as the good news spread.

Because pay days came only every three months, local traders and tavernkeepers inevitably had to allow considerable credit, and as soon as the dockyard workers received their quarter's pay they were almost immediately relieved of most of it to settle outstanding accounts. In 1814 quarterly payments were abandoned and weekly payments instituted. Apart from the basic rates, there was "task and job". This was a form of piecework, "task" referring to work on new construction, and "job" to repairs. The system gave rise to continual arguments which at times erupted into riots. "Task and job" was abolished in 1833. In 1847 a new method of payment, called "day work and check measurement" was introduced. Under this system, if a man's work reached the work norm, he received full pay, and nothing more if he exceeded the norm. However, if he did less, a deduction was made from his wages. The new system was extremely unpopular, and in 1854 there was a return to "task and job".

In the eighteenth century it was the custom in the shipbuilding trade inside and outside the yard to permit workmen to carry home quantities of waste wood known as chips. The term became purely nominal, and the chips became longer and the bundles larger each day. Eventually, the maximum length of the chips was limited to three feet, and this led to doors, furniture and fittings in the houses of the workers assuming dimensions of this order. It has been suggested that in the guise of "chips" enough wood was removed from Plymouth Yard in a month to build a sloop of war. This was bad enough, but first class timber was being ruthlessly cut up to provide the chips and in the centre of many of the bundles were often secreted other items such as copper bolts. In desperation the privilege was stopped in 1803 and a monetary allowance was made in lieu. Labourers received an additional 3d a day, sawyers 4d and shipwrights 6d. So Richard would have received an extra 4d above his basic wage.