

SHIPBUILDING FOR THE ROYAL NAVY AT SANDWICH IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

WING-COMMANDER B. F. HILLS, M.B.E., R.A.F.

Here lieth the body of Mr Safry Hills who died January the 8th 1758 Aged 40 years also the bodies of two Daughters who died in their infancy. The above said Safry Hills was shipwright in this town

Inscription from St Clement's churchyard, Sandwich.

Looking at the muddy state of the river Stour as it flows out to sea through Sandwich Haven, that strip of water from Sandwich bridge to the sea, it is difficult to believe that at any time a vessel worthy of being described as a ship could have been launched from its banks. The river is narrow, its banks steep and the water of no great depth. A survey carried out by Mr. H. Foord in September, 1833¹ shows the width of the river at the bridge as 90 feet and the depth of water at the same point is given in an Admiralty survey by Graeme Spence in 1795 as 12 feet. Yet ships were built here, ships of 382 tons and over 100 feet in length, for service with the Royal Navy, ships that sailed in Nelson's fleets and played no mean part in the defeat of Napoleon at sea. The Otter Brig 202 tons to carry 14 four-pounder guns, launched by Andrew Hills on 17th March, 1782, The Falcon, Weazle and Ferret, built to the same draught and launched during 1782 and 1783. The Hound, Recruit and Royalist and many others built on the banks of the Stour. Who were these shipbuilders of Sandwich and what sort of ships did they build in this corner of Kent? Examination of the contemporary naval records at the Public Record Office, London, and the Maritime Museum, Greenwich, shows that only during the short period between 1782 and 1813 were ships for the Navy built at Sandwich, either by Andrew or Thomas Hills, his son.

¹ Kent Archives Maidstone Sa/P6.

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The name of Hills appears in the earliest of the St. Peter's church registers at Sandwich, spelt Hylles, sometimes Hilles or Hills. The earlier members of the family in the sixteenth century are shown in the year-books of the town as being apprenticed to the trade of shoemaker. The earliest mention of the name in connection with shipbuilding is found in the Canterbury marriage licences where Andrew Hills (4) is referred to as "Ships Carpenter" and granted a licence dated 15th February, 1700, to marry Anna Brothers.² There is no indication of where Andrew (4) had received his training as a ship's carpenter and it would take a great deal of probably fruitless effort to track down the apprenticeship entry in one or the other of the Kentish coastal towns. Andrew (4) was born on the 13th July, 1674, at Sandwich, the second surviving son of Andrew and Jane Hills. His elder brother, William, was also a shipwright, and it is his will made in September 1747 that shows that both he and his brother Andrew (4) were working in the town of Sandwich as shipwrights during the first half of the eighteenth century.

"LAST WILL OF WILLIAM HILLS of Sandwich Probated 18th April, 1750, to Andrew Hills of Sandwich

In the name of God Amen. I William Hills of the Parish of St Clements in the town and port of Sandwich in the County of Kent Shipwright, being of sound mind and memory (God be Praised for the same but and reconsidering the uncertainty of this mortal life, do therefore make and ordain this my last will and Testament in manner and form following, that is to say, First I give and devise unto my loving brother Andrew Hills Of Sandwich aforesaid, Shipwright, messuage or Tenement with the Yard, Garden, Backside thereunto belonging and situate lying and being in the said Parish of St Clements in Sandwich aforesaid and now being in my own occupation and also all the Barn, Storehouse and Dock also situate lying and being in the said Parish of St. Clements in Sandwich aforesaid and now in the tenure or occupation of me the said William Hills and my said brother Andrew Hills and also all that my messuage or tenement wherein my said brother Andrew Hills now dwells also situate and lying and being in the said Parish of St Clements in Sandwich aforesaid, to hold the same unto my said brother Andrew Hills, his Heirs and assigns for ever. I also give and bequeath unto my nephew William Temple the sum of Ten Pounds to be paid to him by my executors hereafter named at his age of Twenty one years, lastly all the rest and residue of my Estate both real and personal whatsoever and wheresoever and of what nature

² See Genealogical Chart at Appendix B.

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and kind or quality soever the same shall consist and be at the time of my decease, after my debts funeral charges and expenses shall be paid and satisfied, I give devise and bequeath unto my said loving brother Andrew Hills his heirs and Executors, Admons and Assigns for ever, whom I do hereby make and appoint sole executors of this my last Will and Testament hereby revoking all former wills by me at any time here untoforemade and do declare this only to be my Last Will and Testament. In Witness of I have hereunto set my hand and seal this fourteenth day of September, in the year of our Lord 1747. Will Hills Signed sealed Published and declared by the said William Hills the Testator as and for his Last Will and Testament in the presence of usat whose request and in whose presence we have subscribed our names as James Cummings, Henry Temple, Samm. Simmons
Will Probated 18th April, 1750 by Rev. William Samfory Clerk Surrogate.”

Of the two brothers, William died without issue, as his will shows, Andrew (4) had five children. The eldest, William born 30th January, 1702, died at the age of sixteen, the next a daughter Anne born 1705, married a Lieutenant James Cumming, RN, on 23rd October, 1729. This, as will be seen later, was important as two of the sons of James Cumming were to become naval officers, William and James Cumming, James reaching the rank of Admiral. In turn James Cumming (2) took to sea under his care, a number of his younger cousins in the Hills family, some of whom also became naval officers during the period of Nelson. Andrew (5) the third born carried on the tradition of shipbuilding from his father, along with his younger brother, Saffery, the last of this small family of five children. Saffery, named after his mother's maiden name, was to die at the early age of 40 in the year 1758 but, not before he had sired a family of eight children. Of these the eldest, William, was trained by his uncle Andrew as a shipwright and the other two sons, Saffrey (2) and James, became naval officers under the tutelage of their cousin, Captain, later Admiral James Cumming. This pattern of the eldest son entering the shipbuilding business at Sandwich and the younger sons joining the naval service, endured throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, in fact until the end of the shipbuilding business in 1813. The number of shipwrights, apprentices and caulkers employed in the yard at Sandwich, only numbered approximately eight and the business was apparently not sufficiently thriving to accept more than the eldest son of each generation into its ranks.

Two sons of Andrew (5) also became naval officers, Lt. William Hills and Capt. John Hills, these last two mentioned, under the patronage of

Admiral Sir John Bentley, a native of Deal with family connections in Sandwich.³ The way to a commission in the sailing navy of those days was usually through the patronage of a naval captain, possibly a friend of the family, who would agree to take a boy of 14 or 15 to sea as "Captains Servant". A captain, depending upon the rate of the ship that he commanded, would be entitled to a number of these so called captain's servants, the post in fact acted as an apprenticeship to service on the quarter deck. The regulations called for a Lieutenant's Examination to be held, the candidate to be 21 years or over and to have spent six years at sea, two years to have been in the rate of midshipman or mate. With the examination passed the candidate was eligible to be considered for a commission as a lieutenant when a post became vacant. In the case of John Hills this period of waiting was relatively short, he passed the examination on the 31st January, 1766, and received his first commission as Third Lieutenant of the *Guernsey* on the 20th October, 1767.

The story of the naval members of this family is an interesting one and very much tied up with the Kentish coast. Although they served in many corners of the globe, at one time or the other, they all served upon ships that formed part of the Navy's screen around Great Britain and particularly around the Kentish coast.

The Royal Navy in the eighteenth century was really a dual body, the Board of Admiralty, which directed policy and the fleets at sea, and the Navy Board which controlled the royal yards, shipbuilding and supply. During peacetime, ship construction was carried out mainly in the royal yards at Deptford, Woolwich, Chatham, Sheerness, Portsmouth and Plymouth, additionally some shipbuilding was carried out by means of contracts placed with merchants in the Thames and other shipbuilding centres on the coast. During time of war a great deal of pressure was placed on the royal yards for the fitting out for sea of the fleets and the repair of ships returning from sea, this resulted in extra work in the form of shipbuilding contracts for the merchant yards.

The commencement of the American War of Independence in 1775 and the subsequent entry into the conflict of the French, Spanish and Dutch, involved this country in an unprecedented effort to find fresh shipbuilding capacity. On the 16th July, 1777, the Admiralty had written to the Navy Board instructing the Board to report on offers they had received for the setting up of new ships in merchants' yards. On the 21st January, 1778, they hastened their first letter⁴

³ Privately published book on the life of Admiral Sir John Bentley, copy in the British Library.

⁴ Admiralty Records in the Public Records Office ADM/2/556.

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“Gentlemen,

Frigates and Sloops being much wanted, I am commanded by my Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to signify their direction to you to report what offers you have had for building such ships in Merchants Yards, in consequence of the enquiries you were desired to make by their Lordships order of the 16th July last. Their Lordships likewise desire to know whether the building of all ships of fifty guns and downwards and sloops which have been ordered to be set up in Merchants Yards is carrying on without waiting the usual time of seasoning as was directed by their Lordships order of the 15th September last. I am etc.,”.

On the 28th January, 1778 the Navy Board replied.⁵

“Sir,

You having by your letter of the 21st instant signified to us the directions of the Right Honourable Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to report what offers we have had for building frigates and sloops in Merchants Yards in consequence of the enquiries we were directed to make by their Lordships order of the 16th July last, likewise whether the building of all ships of 50 guns and downwards and sloops, which have been ordered to be set up in Merchants Yards is carrying on without waiting the usual time of seasoning as we were directed by their Lordships order of the 15th September last. In answer to which we desire you will please to acquaint their Lordships that we have engaged with every person of character who has offered to build ships for His Majesty at proper places and at moderate prices and we have enquired for and treated with all those who are capable thereof. As those builders we are now engaged with get on with the ships they have in hand, we propose to offer others to them to build when we will lay the same before their Lordships for their direction.

Every builder has had our orders to proceed in going on with the works of ships of 50 guns and downwards and sloops, so soon as their frames are compleat without waiting for seasoning, as was directed by their Lordships order of the 15th September last. We are etc.”

Without doubt considerable pressure was beginning to mount on the Board of Admiralty to supply the ships required to meet the growing strength of the embryo American Fleet. Admiral Gambier writing on board the *Ardent* off New York on 6th July, 1778, wrote⁶ “small ships, small good sailing vessels and numbers of them, are not only indispensably necessary on this coast, but ’tis also impossible to do

⁵ ADM/106/2205.

⁶ Sandwich Papers Vol. II Navy Records Society.

without 20 gun ships, coppered, sloops, cutters and small vessels are of the greatest utility here; some ships of force are necessary likewise. The rebels can now muster three score sail from their different ports, from 36 to 20 and 18 guns——". Again Gambier writing from HMS Leviathan off New York on the 6th September, 1778. "——for 'tis small ships that are useful here and small vessels coppered cutters would be of amazing utility, and if sailing schooners and sloops were ordered to be purchased here it would be of inconceivable benefit to the service——". As well as seeking fresh building capacity in the merchants yards the Navy Board also used every effort to purchase ready-built vessels of suitable design. On the 20th March, 1778 the Board reported to the Admiralty.⁷

"Having in consequence of the order from the Right Honourable Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to purchase large Cutters, sent Mr. Pollard and Mr. Benjamin the Naval Officer at Deal acquainting us that the Charming Molly in Dover Pier of 186 tons 15 months old and the Active now on the stocks at Folkestone which may be ready to launch in 10 or 12 days, are offered them and that in consequence thereof we have wrote to the owners to come to Town to treat with us for them. They are also acquainted us there are several others at sea and that Mr. James Clark at Folkestone tendered them a cutter of 220 tons which he sent for from Dunkirk where she lay, but received advice that she was sold there. We are etc."

The first heard of shipbuilding at Sandwich is recorded in the Minutes of a meeting of the Board of Admiralty dated Wednesday 21st February, 1781⁸.

"Present Earl of Sandwich
Mr. Penton etc.,

"Mr. Andrew Hills, Shipbuilder of Sandwich, having made an offer to build one or two Brigs from two to three hundred tons Burthen, it was decided that the Navy Board be directed to contract with him for building one Brig or if they judge it more preferable, two Brigs, provided he will undertake them upon reasonable and proper terms, transmitting to them Estimates of the Expense thereto".

These two brigs were to be named the Otter and the Falcon and were the first two ships to be built at Sandwich for the Navy. There is mention also at about this time of a shipbuilder by the name of Joseph

⁷ ADM/106/2205.

⁸ ADM/3/92.

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Stewart at Sandwich, who is credited in various Navy Board papers with building the Pluto, a fireship of some 421 tons, at Sandwich in the year 1782. However, the evidence provided by Stewart's own letters now at the PRO⁹ indicates that he was more of a middleman acting in partnership with shipwrights in other coastal towns and that the Pluto was built at Sandgate.

“Sandgate March 5th, 1782”

“Honourable Sirs,

Having a good yard nearly adjoining to where the Pluto Fireship was built and every other necessary for building ships, we are desirous of building for Government, and beg leave to acquaint your Honours we are ready to contract for building immediately such ship or ships as your Honours chose to build at Sandgate and on the same terms as others are let at we are,

most respectfully your Honours most
obedient humble Servants
Jos. Stewart
Wm & John Hall

“Please direct answer to
Mr. Stewart Sandwich”

The Hon. Principal Officers and
Commissioner of his Majesty's Navy.”

This letter was covered by one written from Sandwich and dated the following day:

“Honourable Sirs,

“Sandwich Mar. 6th 1782”

The Pluto Fireship being launched and delivered, I apprehend from letters. I received some time ago, that your Honours have now no objections to treat further with me for building again at Sandgate and having formed a connection in that Branch with Messrs Halls Builders at that place, I make free to inclose herein our joint letters making your Honourable Board a tender of our services. I am most respectfully etc.,
Jos. Stewart”

Although much use is made of the term “Merchants Yard” in respect of shipbuilding in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the facilities actually required were few and as Ralph Davis writes in his book “The Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the 17th and 18th Centuries”: “Small vessels, up to a few score tons could be and were built in any sheltered waters, and by any competent carpenter”.

⁹ ADM/106/1274.

At the time the order for the Otter and the Falcon was placed, the war in North America was reaching its climax and in November 1781, the news of the fall of Yorktown heralded the end of the American War of Independence. Lord Sandwich, who had been the first Lord of the Admiralty during the period had been severely criticized for his handling of maritime affairs and at the end of 1781 he prepared his defence for the series of Parliamentary debates that were to end Lord North's ministry. The following extracts from a memorandum¹⁰ that formed the basis of Lord Sandwich's defence are interesting, summarizing the problems of expanding Britain's shipbuilding capacity in time of war and also providing proof of the fact that the ships built at Sandwich during this period were the first to be built there for the Royal Navy.

"But I suppose I shall be told that, though we have done twice as much as ever was done before, we might still have done more, and might have had more than 37 ships in hand at this moment when the fate of the British Empire is at stake. The answer to this is that there is a line which the exertions of every country cannot pass. We cannot, nor ever could, do more than employ all the shipwrights that this country affords; the law does not allow compulsion upon any race of men but common sailors; and if the trade of this country is to go on, the merchants will and must always give more for shipbuilding than the Crown. The increase of wages without increase of work in the dockyards would be exactly so much money thrown away, as the merchants would rise in proportion. Therefore, according to my reasoning, there is no possibility of alluring the men by profit or getting them by compulsion; and it is on this account that no mode has yet been found out of extending our naval construction but by making contracts with all responsible persons who have a capital, sufficient materials at hand, and a proper place to build in, for as to going on with building in the Kings Yards (Chatham excepted and Deptford and Woolwich in a small degree), it must always be nearly at a stand in time of war on account of the constant employment of the artificers in refitting the ships that come from sea, and fitting out those that are wanted for immediate service.

The question then is whether ships have been built by contract wherever there was a possibility of its being done. To this I answer that the number now in hand compared with former times is a strong presumptive proof that every effort has been made on this head; but it will be proved positively that ships have been built in eight places where none were ever set up before, and the Navy Board has so much knowledge of the coast of this island that they well know every place

¹⁰ Sandwich Papers Vol. IV Navy Records Society.

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where a ship can be built or a contract made that can be executed. No place is proper for building ships of the line where there is not a dock to receive them after they are launched, or in rivers with good water, open mouths, and muddy bottoms where they can lay in safety till put into a state to be brought into the King's yards to be fitted for service. As a prove that there has been no omission with regard to inquiries where ships can be built a list is annexed where the eight new places are named where ships are now in hand and three places where line of battle ships were never built before (Ipswich, Wivenhoe, Bristol, Mistley, Sandwich, Dover, Sandgate, Leith; East Cowes, Bursledon, Gravesend).

“We have even crossed the Tweed and set up a sloop at Leith; but we have received very little encouragement from this experiment, as the sloop was delayed near a year beyond her time, waiting for materials from England, as will appear from the annexed letters from the person appointed by the Navy Board to superintend the building. It is besides to be observed that ships built at a great distance from the dockyards occasion vast delays and expense in getting their stores to them, which must be sent from some of the established yards. However, as I have already said, notwithstanding these inconveniences ships have been set up wherever there was any prospect of the contractors' performing their engagements. Engaging persons to build who are not equal to the undertaking gains no ground and is liable to every kind of abuse. When a ship is contracted for, a considerable imprest is made to the builder to the amount of a 9th of the value of the ship; if he is not a man of credit and integrity he will delay your business and employ your money for other purposes, being secure of your work, which you cannot take out of his hands on account of the imprest advanced, as appears to have been the case with the builder at Leith.”

This piece of writing has a very modern ring about it, with its problems of man management, inflationary trends and difficulties of production.

William Boys in his history of Sandwich mentions the lease of the “dock sawpit and lodge on the common key near the round house” to Andrew Hills (6) and the lease survives in the town records now held by the Kent Record Office, Maidstone. It is dated 29th November, 1764, and is for a term of 21 years, renewable after 18. “Lease to Andrew Hills of the dock, sawpit and lodge on the common key from the ferry way to the lower head, save only in the direct way to the lower head a passage 20 feet wide at the least; also a piece of pasture on the great key and on the walls from Sandown gate to hogs corner, except the hedges and walls for drying clothes, and except liberty to walk over and through the demised premises; except also the dues of the town for

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goods landed or shipped from the same. The tenant to repair the fences and etc., and to pay Scots lots etc. Rent £4. Term 21 years renewable at the end of 18 years. dtd 29th November, 1764.”

This dock is without doubt the same dock as that shown on Foord's plan of 1833 now in the Kent Archives and previously mentioned on page 1. It was here then, that Andrew Hills (6) commenced the building of the Otter brig in May 1781. The plan of the ship had been sent to the Admiralty by the Navy Board early in 1777, had received their Lordships approval in February of that year and at least two ships had already been built to the draught, The Childers and the Alert, the last named by Mr. Thomas King, of Dover. The Alert was commenced at Dover at the end of 1778 and launched on the 6th August, 1779. Building of the Otter commenced at Sandwich during May of 1781 the time allowed for building was to be ten months. The illustration (Plate I) shows a model of the completed brig now in the Science Museum at South Kensington, the design from which the ship was constructed is shown on Plate II. The Navy Board on the 19th June, 1781 wrote to the Admiralty proposing the establishment of guns and men for the Otter.¹¹

“In return to your letter of the 18th instant, we desire you will please to propose to the Right Honourable the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty that the Brigs building by Mr. Andrew Hills of Sandwich may be established with 14 four pounder guns and a complement of 80 men. We are etc.,”

The responsibility of overseeing the building of the Otter was placed on the Royal Yard at Deptford, it would also be the responsibility of this yard, following the launching, to bring her round from Sandwich and rig her for sea service. The major part of her complement of officers and men would also report on board at Deptford and help in the preparations for her first voyage. The policy for sending the smaller ships and sloops to the “eastern ports” for fitting out, had been thrashed out earlier, in 1779 by the Navy Board¹² with the Admiralty, and all of the sloops built at Sandwich went for their final inspection and fitting out, either to Deptford or Sheerness.

“6th September, 1779

Sir,

As the number of frigates and smaller vessels paid off and refitted at the Western ports during the last summer has occupied more than one half of the shipwrights of the yard and considerably impeded the

¹¹ADM/106/2209.

¹²ADM/106/2207.

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bringing on of the larger ships as well as prevented our progress in preparing Masts and Yards for the Western Squadron and as the season now approaches for refitting and cleaning the Line of Battle ships, we desire you will propose to their Right Honourable Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty that none of the frigates or smaller vessels may be paid off or refitted at Portsmouth or Plymouth during this winter but sent to the Eastern ports where they can not interfere with the Line of Battle ships."

On the 6th August, 1781 the officers of Deptford Yard wrote to the Admiralty providing them with a cost estimate for building the Otter and the Falcon.

"Deptford Yard 6th August, 1781

Honourable Sirs,

In obedience to you directions of the 10th past, we send you following an estimate of the charge of building the undermentioned Brigs and sloops and providing them with Masts, Yards, Furniture and Stores to an 8 months proportion.

Rate	Guns	Names	Tons	Hull Masts & Yards			Furniture & Stores			Total
				Material	Workm.	Total	Material	Workm.	Total	
Brig	14	Flirt	200	1367.0.0	683.0.0	2050.0.0	1180.0.0	36.0.0	1216.0.0	3266.0.0
Brig	14	Speedy	200	1367.0.0	683.0.0	2050.0.0	1180.0.0	36.0.0	1216.0.0	3266.0.0
Brig	14	Otter	200	1367.0.0	683.0.0	2050.0.0	1180.0.0	36.0.0	1216.0.0	3266.0.0
Brig	14	Falcon	200	1367.0.0	683.0.0	2050.0.0	1180.0.0	36.0.0	1216.0.0	3266.0.0
Sloop		News	314	2337.0.0	1168.0.0	3505.0.0	2637.0.0	43.0.0	2680.0.0	6185.0.0

The following February, the first of the two brigs building by Andrew Hills was nearing completion and the Navy Board wrote to the Admiralty on the 16th February, 1782, stating that "the Otter Brigantine building by Mr Hills at Sandwich to be launched the first spring tide in March next".¹³ There was obviously a profit to be made at this time in the construction of brigs for the Navy and on the 11th April, 1782, the Navy Board again wrote to the Admiralty¹³ "Mr A Hills having made us an offer to build one or two Brigs or cutters at Sandwich for His Majesty's service; We desire you will let us know the pleasure of the Right Honourable Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty if we are to accept the same etc.," The offer was accepted

¹³ ADM/106/2209.

and the two ships that were to follow in 1783 and 1784 were built to the same design and named the Weazle and the Ferret, making a total of four of this class built at Sandwich by Andrew Hills (6) during the years 1781 to 1784.

The Otter arrived at Deptford on the 29th of April 1782, where she was formally inspected by the officers of the yard who then reported to the Navy Board:¹⁴

“Deptford Yard 29th April, 1782”

Honourable Sirs,

In obedience to your directions of the 21st May 1779, we have been on board the Otter Brig built by Mr. Hill at Sandwich and find her works are performed in a Workmanlike and substantial manner except the Lowerdeck abaft over the Magazine which is only laid with 2” Deals, lined on the underside, which we are of opinion is not a proper security to the Magazine, pray your directions if we may secure it in the same manner as the Flirts with a 2 in lining over it, likewise to know if the contractor is to find proper glass as the present is only thin and the expence will be as follows Viz:

Materials			Workmanship			Total		
£	s	d	£	s	d	£	s	d
6	6	10	1	12	0	6	18	10
Glass 42 panes						6	16	6
						<hr/>		
						£13	15	4

We are etc”.

The following day she was taken into “the single dock” to be fitted out for sea. The picture, Plate III, painted by Nicholas Pocock shows the docks at Deptford as they must have been in their heyday. A new officer now takes the stage in the form of John Boddington of the Office of Ordnance who wrote on 8th May, 1782 to the Admiralty:¹⁵

“Sir,

The Flirt and the Otter, two Brigs built for His Majesty’s service, being arrived in the River, and no directions having been yet received from the Lords of the Admiralty concerning their establishment, I am commanded by His Grace the Master General and Board to desire you will be pleased to represent the same to their Lordships, that no time may be lost in preparing their Guns and Carriages. I am etc,”

The corner of the letter is turned down and the secretary has written “Let the necessary orders be dispatched”. The note is dated the 11th

¹⁴ ADM/106/3320.

¹⁵ ADM/1/4013.

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May, three days after the date of the letter. A note in another hand goes on "A letter respecting the establishment of the Otter was sent to the Ordnance Bd on the 20th June, 1781". It is interesting to note here the method used by the Admiralty to carry out its office business. No complicated filing system or minute sheets, but a curt note on the reverse of the letter of the action to be taken resulting in a letter dated the 8th in the Ordnance office being actioned on the 14th.

The second of the two brigs, the Falcon, was launched in August and on the 9th September, 1782, the Navy Board informed the Admiralty:¹⁶

"In return to your letter of the 6th instant, we desire you will please to propose to the Right Honourable Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty that the Incendiary Fireship being to be launched the 26th July last, and Falcon Brig the first Spring in August, we ordered the Jury rigging to be sent from Deptford to fetch the former on the 6th July last, and on the 18th to send them for the Falcon as soon as the Incendiary was brought up, that the Incendiary having got up to Deptford the 2nd Inst. We have repeated our order to the officer of that Yard to fetch up the Falcon. We are etc." In due course, in fact on the 7th November the officers of the Deptford Yard informed the Navy Board¹⁷ "In obedience to your instructions of the 21st May, 1779, we have been on board H.M. Brig Falcon built by Mr Hill at Sandwich and find her works are completed in a workmanlike and substantial manner, agreeable to contract". They further reported on the 9th November "We pray leave to acquaint you the 7th inst we undocked from the single dock the 2 chain boats and docked in their room H.M. Sloop Falcon". Yet another officer now comes into view, in the form of Mr. Henry Canham, the overseer. From the beginning to the end of a shipbuilding contract an overseer was appointed by the Navy Board to check on the standard of materials and workmanship, also to provide a certificate, at various well defined stages, of construction on the basis of which, part of the contract price for the vessel was paid by the Board.¹⁸

"Sandwich, 17th September, 1782

Honourable Sirs,

I think it my duty to acquaint you that the Deptford Lighter is arrived at this port, with Jury Masts and etc for the Falcon Brigantine, in tracking the Lighter up the Haven the officer appointed to receive Brigantine has had the misfortune to have his leg broke. Mr. Hills

¹⁶ ADM/106/2210.

¹⁷ ADM/106/3320.

¹⁸ ADM/106/1270.

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proposed to launch on Monday next if your Honours will be pleased to appoint another officer to take charge of the vessel”

“I am your Honours faithful and obedient Servant
Henry Canham”

The two further brigs building at Sandwich, the Weazle and the Ferret, were launched in April 1783 and August 1784, respectively. Andrew Hills was to build one more ship for the Royal Navy, the Hound, a sloop rigged as a brig of 313 tons. She was begun on 28th December, 1795, and launched on the 25th March, 1796, and again the overseer was Mr. Henry Canham. She did not last long being lost at sea during October, 1800. Of the other ships built by Andrew Hills at Sandwich the Otter, launched on the 17th March, 1782, had a long and useful life being one of the ships with Nelson at Copenhagen on 2nd April, 1801, and finally being sold out of the service for £1,000 on the 16th December, 1801. Her sister ship, the Falcon served until 1800 when, as a fireship, she was expended at Dunkirk Roads on the 7th July, 1800. The Weazle was also unlucky, launched on the 18th April, 1783, she was wrecked in Barnstaple Bay on the 12th January, 1799, with the loss of her commander Hon. Henry Grey and most of her crew. Andrew Hills lived on at Sandwich until 13th June, 1811, when he died and he is buried at St. Clement's in Sandwich. The ships built by Andrew Hills are summarized, along with those built later by his son Thomas, in Appendix A.

SHIP BUILDING AT SANDWICH BY THOMAS HILLS 1804-1813

The family ship-building business on Andrew's retirement, fell to his eldest son, Thomas Hills, and the first that we hear of him is in a survey carried out by the Admiralty in April 1804 “Shewing the number of Shipwrights and also of Apprentices, employed in the Merchants Yards in Great Britain”. The returns list only one yard at Sandwich, Mr. Hills employing 5 shipwrights and 3 apprentices. At Dover the shipwrights and their apprentices numbered 123, principally employed by Messrs. King, Hedgcock and Walker, at Folkestone 11 and at Deal 23, at the last mentioned place, all were employed as boat-builders. A diagram, Appendix C, illustrates the distribution of shipbuilders throughout Kent at this time. Thomas Hills wrote to the Admiralty on the 28th July, 1805,¹⁹ asking for a contract to build a ship of from 100 to 350 tons burthen:²⁰ “Having understood there are some vessels, for

¹⁹ ADM/106/1533.

²⁰ ADM/106/1533.

SHIPBUILDING AT SANDWICH

expected soon to be let on the Navy Service, I would wish to engage for the building of one from 100 to 350 tons burthen and to complete the same in a good manner in four or five months; the favour of your obligation will greatly confer on, Gentlemen your most Obedient and humble servant Thos Hills, Shipbuilder". The reverse of the letter is endorsed "Aquaint Mr. Marsden of the offer made by Mr Hills and of the number of these vessels now building and desire to inform their Lordships thereon" a different hand adds "Mr Clayton for an account of the ships now building" and finally in a third hand "There are now building 17 Brigs from 282 to 382 Tons". A further piece of paper is attached to this letter and in the hand of Thomas Hills is written "Honb. Gentl. I beg leave to inform you that I am willing to agree with you to build one Brig of the Burden of 282 Tons at £16 P Ton and will Launch in 6 months. I am etc." This piece of paper is endorsed "The Board agreed with Mr. Thos. Hills to build in his Yard at Sandwich a Brig of 282 Tons to be completed in six months and to be paid for at the rate of sixteen pounds per Ton" another hand adds "Done with".

It appears from the evidence that Thomas Hills had visited the Navy Board in London and that the basis of a form of agreement had been drawn up on the spot for a new brig of 282 tons. This brig was to be named the Satellite. Work began in September, 1805, to a design by Sir William Rule and she was launched in March of the following year. Not a lucky ship, she had a short life of only five years and foundered in the Channel on 19th January, 1811. Halfway through the building of the Satellite, Thomas was already laying plans for further ships and on the 29th November 1805, he wrote to the Navy Board:²¹ I have to inform you that if approved of by the Board I will Ingage to Build two Briggs of 282 Tons each for the same draft and prices per Ton as I have takeing one of that size and to complete the same in Twelve Callender months. I am etc Thomas Hills, Shipwright, Sandwich Kent". He wrote again to the Navy Board on the 6th January the following year repeating the offer. This time he was to build two brigs both of 383 tons to be named the Recruit and Royalist, again to a design of Sir Wm. Rule. The contract must have been signed early in the year as by the 7th August, 1806, he wrote again to the Navy Board asking for a further contract.²²

"Sandwich Aug 7th 1806"

"Wm Marsden Esq.,"

I request you will be pleased to acquaint the Right honourable the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty that I am desirous of entering into a contract to build one or two Briggs of 382 Tons each for his

²¹ ADM/106/1533.

²² ADM/1/4686.

Majesty's Service, on the same terms as I am now building two of the same size, one of which will be ready for Launching in about one month, and the other is in great forwardness.

I shall be obliged by your informing me as soon as convenient, whether their Lordships are pleased to accept this offer. I have the honour etc".

Both the Recruit and the Royalist were to lead very active and successful lives at sea. HMS Royalist is credited in Wm. Clowes History of the Royal Navy with capturing four French ships during 1809 alone: The Grand Napoléon 18 guns, taken off Dungeness, 17th November, 1809, The Heureuse Etoile 2, Beau Marseille 14 and the François 14. The Recruit was launched at Sandwich on 31st August, 1806, and the Royalist on the 10th January, 1807. Both ships were eventually sold out of the service, the Royalist to a Mr. Harper for £1,130 on the 3rd February, 1819, and the Recruit on the 7th August, 1822, for £1,050, the Navy had obtained good value for money.

Thomas Hills duly wrote on the 31st August, 1806, to tell the Navy Board of the successful launching of the Recruit and gave his opinion that even larger vessels could be built and successfully launched at Sandwich.²³

“Sandwich August 31 1806

“Hon^{bl} Gentlemen

I have the honour herewith to inform you that in consequence of so favourable opportunity of a sufficient plenty of water I had the pleasure of an exceeding good launch of the Recruit Brig. The Admiral from Deal seeing the necessity was so kind as to accomodate me with the necessary Hawsers for as were wanted on the occasion. There are no doubt from this supply of water that vessels of a larger size may be constructed with great safety. I hope the result will meet with your approbation in honor to my satisfaction”

I have the honour to be etc., Thomas Hills”

The overseer, this time a Mr. John Freeman, of Woolwich, sent off on the 14th September, 1806, his statement to the Board of the contract measurements as against the actual built measurements. Having built scale models of these vessels, I am lost in admiration that the largest discrepancy is of one inch in one hundred feet!²⁴

²³ ADM/106/1533.

²⁴ ADM/95/80.

SHIPBUILDING AT SANDWICH

"Sandwich 14th September, 1806"

Honourable Sir.

I received yours this morning and by return of post comply with your request. The under mentioned account is the dimensions of His Majesty's Sloop Recruit of 18 Guns built by Mr. Thomas Hills Sandwich, contrasted with those on the Draught. Likewise her Draught of Water when launched.

	Dimensions			
	By Contract		As Built	
	feet	ins	ft	ins
Length on the Deck	100	0	100	1
Length of the Keel for Tonage	77	3½	77	3½
Breadth Extreme	30	6	30	6¼
Depth in the Hold	12	9	12	9½
Burthen in Tons	382 ⁴ / ₉₄		382 ⁷ / ₉₄	

Draught of Water when launched

Afore 6ft 2 inches

Abaft 10ft 10 inches

signed John Freeman"

Both of these ships were sailed around the coast to Sheerness to be formally inspected, fitted for sea service, provisioned and commissioned. Payment for the ships, as previously explained, was made as the building of the vessel progressed from stage to stage, the last payment being delayed until the final survey of the ship by the dockyard team. Sheerness was obviously very busy at this period and there was some delay in docking the Recruit for survey. Thomas Hills was keen to receive final payment, no doubt to meet his expenses regarding timber and labour costs and wrote on the 2nd November, 1806, to the Board: "From the information I have received from Mr. Perkins it appears the Recruit Brig built by me cannot be docked for a survey at present. In consequence of which I hope you will be pleased to give such directions as may tend to her being surveyed afloat".²⁵

The building of the sister ship The Royalist began in May of 1806 and was launched on the 11th January the following year. Thomas seems to have been a little too eager in the launching of this vessel and she ran aground during the launch for want of a sufficient depth of water. He sent a letter off to the Navy Board the day following the launch to inform the Hon Gentlemen and to offer a few soothing words regarding the mishap: "I beg to inform you that I launched the Royalist on the 11th instant. The springs being so very slack (such has not been these ten months past before) that I am afraid the Lighter will

²⁵ ADM/106/1533.

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not be able to get her to sea before next springs. She lies perfectly easy and free from any damage whatever".²⁶ Mr. Freeman, the overseer, was not, however, quite so happy about the situation and sent off his letter of explanation to the Board, absolving himself from any blame in the matter, the same day:²⁷

"Sandwich 12th Jany. 1807"

Honourable Sirs,

I beg leave to inform that Mr Thomas Hills Sandwich on the 10th instant, launched His Majesty's Sloop Royalist, but, not having sufficient water struck her stern against the ground, which occasioned her to stop, but, it happened so that when the stop came, her Bow was off the lower end of the slideing planks, so that she sette quite upright when the tide was down. We place Twenty Butts under her and the next high water endeavoured to move her astern but was not able to move her. The vessel lays now in this situation and I am affraid we shall not be able to gett her off till next spring tides. There is no appearance of the sloop receiving any damage, unless it be that some of the copper should be off the false keel.

I informed Mr. Hills before he launched the vessel that there was not sufficient water and that we would act very improper in attempting it. His answer was that the vessel was in his charge and he was determined to launch her. There was but 10 ft 0 ins water where her stern drop and the sloop draws 11 feet 0 in so that I will leave it to your Hons superior judgment to determine whether the builder was right or wrong in launching the vessel. I am etc. Jn Freeman. Overseer".

Both the Recruit and the Royalist finally got away from Sheerness to their successful careers afloat, in the summer of 1807.

Sheerness yard, on the instructions of the Navy Board prepared an estimate of the total cost of these ships ready for sea, sending it off on the 14th September, 1808,²⁸ addressed to the Committee for Correspondence.

"Sheerness Yard 14th September, 1808"

"Honob. Gentlemen

In obedience to directions contained in your Warrant of the 10th inst, to send an estimate for building two Brigs by Mr. Hill of Sandwich distinguishing the Copper bolting and Coppering and fitting them for sea with Masts, Yards, Rigging and sails to an 8 months proportion; we herewith transmit the same"

²⁶ ADM/106/1533.

²⁷ ADM/106/1515.

²⁸ ADM/95/8.

SHIPBUILDING AT SANDWICH

	Materials	workmanship	Total
Estimate for building a Brig Sloop 382 ⁴¹ / ₉₄			
For the Hull 382 ⁴¹ / ₉₄ Tons at £14.0.0 per ton	£3571	1783	5354
Copper bolting	190	—	190
Coppering	606	20	626
Fitting for sea	82	257	339
Masts & Yards	390	70	460
Furniture and stores	2388	82	2470
	£7227	2212	9439

The remaining detailed records of the Navy Board are very incomplete, sometimes one is very lucky in finding a complete run of letters covering a certain period, but, often the result of past weeding out leaves large and infuriating gaps in the correspondence. Although two ships were to be built in the years 1808 to 1809, the Arachne and the Castilian, no correspondence regarding them remains in the Navy Board papers. Some details have, however, been gleaned from the Navy Estimates of the period and are included in Appendix A.

There then appears to be a pause in shipbuilding activity for the Navy at Sandwich, indeed the years between 1809 and 1812 were very slack generally, 20 ships being built in merchants' yards for the Royal Navy in 1809, 22 in 1810 and only 9 in 1811. This compares with peak construction for the Navy by the merchants' yards of 80 ships in 1804, 72 in 1808 and 60 in 1813. There was of course, inevitably, a pause between a ship's construction and the time when, victualled, fitted out and complete with crew, it was ready for sea and fully commissioned. During the period considered, 1808 to 1811, the Navy reached the peak figure of 709 ships in commission, and it fluctuated around this figure until 1815 when, with the end of the Napoleonic War it fell away to a figure of only 124 and very lean years indeed for the ship-builders.

The next series of letters commences in January 1812, with Thomas Hills again writing to the Navy Board:

“Sandwich January 10th 1812

Honb. Sirs

Having taking the Liberty of offering to the Honable Bord for to build in my yard at Sandwich two gunbrigs of 179 Tons each agreeable to the Draft and contract on the same terms as other builders have taken them at if my Proposals should be aproved of by the Honb Board, be pleased for to favour me with a anser. I am etc. Tho. Hills”

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A note is written in the usual style by the Navy Board Secretary, on the back of the letter. "Ask him if he will deliver them at Sheerness at his own expense and risk, and if so, we will agree with him to build two Gun Brigs at £18 per ton and to be delivered at Sheerness in six months." Thomas was, however, obviously in a hurry for further employment and took the step on the 17th of January of asking his local M.P. Mr. J. S. Rainier to exercise some pressure on the Admiralty Board to obtain him a contract.²⁹

"Dear Sir,

I am sorry for given you so much trouble by riting to you again. I this morning received a letter from my agent, he informs me that my letter I sent to the Navy Office is referd to the Admiralty, if you will have the goodness to apply to some friend there of yours in my behalf I judge no objections will be made and shall have my request granted. I find superior power than the Navy office is required, I hope that all our intrest is not lost from the old ancient town, in respect to the information I have add if not true you may have a friend at the Admiralty that can assist me by your intrest. I shall be at your command on any occasion.

I remain sir your hum. servt.
Thos Hills Shipbuilder."

Rainier forwarded the letter to the Admiralty, although by this time Thomas had already received a favourable answer from the Navy Board as his letter of the 19th January, 1812 shows: "Honourable Sirs, I will attend to the Honourable Board this present week according to your request for Building two Gun Brigs. I am etc."

Work began on the Manly in February 1812 and in that month the Sheerness yard sent off to the Navy Board an estimate of the total cost of each of the gun brigs.³⁰

"Sheerness Yard 8th February, 1812

Honourable Sirs,

In compliance with the directions contained in your Warrant of the 3rd inst. We beg leave to send you an estimate of the Hull, Copper bolting, Copper Sheathing, Masts, Yards, Rigging and Sails to one eight Months proportion for one of the two Gun Brigs to be built by Mr. Hills at Sandwich.

²⁹ ADM/3/2418.

³⁰ ADM/95/8.

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	Materials	Workmanship	Total
For the Hull 179 ⁴⁸ / ₉₄ Tons at £18.0.0 per Ton	2154	1077	3231
Copper bolting	130	—	130
Copper sheathing	431	11	442
Masts and Yards	164	34	198
Fitting for Sea	70	60	130
Furniture and Stores	1570	44	1614
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	£4519	1226	5745
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>

“The Honourable Navy Board”

On the 12th March the overseer of the Hasty and the Manley, a Mr. James Elliot, had obviously been picked up by a visiting dockyard official for too readily giving a certificate for work that had not been completed. He wrote in his defence to the Navy Board on the 12th March, 1812:

“Honourable Sirs,

In obedience to your directions I beg leave to state in justification of myself in granting a certificate for the Manly and Hasty Brigs. At that time the Keel of the Manly on the blocks, the stern frame complete, upper and lower pieces of stem apron and Knightheads ready to put together, five pieces of deadwood and ten floors cut, six pieces trimmed, all the first futtocks for the frame cut except for eight trimmed, six seconds and thirds cut about twenty pieces sided for first and second futtocks also two pieces sided for Keelson pieces. I also beg leave to state the quantity of timber actually received in the Yard since the contractor agreed to build the Manley and Hasty Brigs and the said timber was in the Yard before the Certificates were granted:

Rough and sided Oak timber Straight and Compass, collected from the various bills –	L	s	d
	1382	9	
On board the Blue Eyed Maid (which was in the Haven at the time Mr Hellyer was in the Yard, Mr Hellyer saw the account) containing Oak timber straight and compass sided Elm for Keel pieces, Plank etc	483.	3	
	<hr/>		
	L1865. 11.		
	<hr/>		

In granting the Certificates for each vessel I had previously considered the stock upon the whole which I hope will in part justify

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my conduct Mr Hellyer would not allow but one Certificate in consequence of there being a deficiency of Floors.

I am Honbl Sirs, Your most obedient
& Humble servant
James Elliot
Overseer.

Honble Navy Board.”

Later, in May on the eleventh, Thomas was still struggling to complete his contract on time and wrote to the Navy Board whilst in London:

“London May 11th, 1812

Honourable Sirs,

I beg leave to inform the Honourable Board that since the commencement of my contract I have been much disappointed by contrary winds and blowing weather, by ships not arriving for six weeks and the trouble in getting the floors and second futtocks for the two Brigs building by me, the Hasty and Manly. I hope the Honourable Board will consider my case and be pleased to allow me one month longer time but that allowance will if possible make no difference to me if I can get the vessels complete in the former time. I hope the Honourable Board will be pleased to grant me their answer. I am etc Thos Hills”

240 Tottenham Court Road.”

The board were sympathetic and the letter is endorsed. “I would recommend that Mr. Hills be informed that the extension of time will be granted him for building the Hasty and Manly Brigs and that he may be desired to use every means in his power to get them completed in the time allowed by his contract for building them”. Another hand, presumably the Secretary to the Board, adds “The Board approved of writing to Mr. Hills as above”. This note is dated 12th May, 1812. Again one is struck by the speed of administration. Thomas Hills letter is dated the 11th May, it was delivered to the Navy Board on that same day, an opinion was given by one of the staff with his recommendation the following day and on that same day, the 12th, the Board made its decision.

By the 23rd of May the timber must have arrived and Thomas was able to report: “As the two Gun Brigs I have now engaged are in great forwardness I beg leave to say I will engage to build in my yard at Sandwich one of the larger size Brigs of 383 Tons on the same terms as other Builders have taking them and to deliver her to Sheerness Yard. Should my proposals be approved of by the Honourable Board I

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should be happy to engage to build one of them for His Majesty's Service I remain etc. Thos Hills". A contract to build one of the larger brigs of 382 tons was duly agreed with him by the Navy Board. Twelve of these gun brigs "building in merchants yards" were included in the Naval Estimates of 1812 at a cost of £4,050 for the hulls, masts and yards and £1,350 for the rigging:

The Shamrock	Building at Lynn
The Boxer	Building at Redbridge
The Snap	Building at Lyme
The Conflict, Contest, Plumper and Swinger	Building at Bridport
The Thistle	Building at Rochester
The Bold & Borer	Building at Bursledon
The Manly & Hasty	Building at Sandwich

The gun brigs were designed by Sir William Rule and were to carry 10 × 18-pounder carronades plus 2 × 18-pounder guns.

The Manly was the first finished of the two Sandwich brigs, she was launched on the 13th July, 1812. The Hasty was nearing completion when Thomas Hills again wrote to the Navy Board on the 4th August, 1812. His main purpose was to obtain the first payment for the new brig of 382 tons building, the Argus. On this score the Board was quite adamant and endorsed the letter: "Inform him no payment can be made till the works required by the contract are completed". The second paragraph of the letter concerns the completion of the Hasty and again a plea for payment.³¹

Sandwich Aug 4th 1812

"Honourable Sirs,

I have taking the Liberty to inform your Honourable Board I have now at my yard at Sandwich, most of the floor timbers and timber comes in dayly. I am only in want of a few more floors, I have at least one hundred load of timber now in the yard the Keel is cutt out the stem and stern frame in the yard. I hope the Hon Board will judge I am intitaled to the first payment for the Brig Argus. Mr. Elliot doth not consider himself justified to report the same untill all the floors are in the yard which I hope will in a few days as ther is so much timber in the yard I hope the Hon Board will allow me the first payment.

The Brig Hasty is in a great state of forwardness the bottom is all planked but 7 streaks would have been completed ten days back but have disapointed in some plank coming. I have this post heard it is now shiped and is hourly expected. I have all the beams in and kneed

³¹ ADM/106/1534.

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the deck laid the coming all compleat most of the sealing in and lower deck beames cutt bottom drove off and duded knee of the head up and near compleat as there is much more work done then the 7 streaks, I hope the Hon board will allow me the payment which would become due when the bottom was compleat. I should not have asked but have so many men at work and so much to pay for carrage of timber. I have two large bills to pay this week which I am not able to answer I hope the Hon Board will consider my case and grant me my request. I remain etc.

Tho. Hills"

James Elliot, the overseer, wrote to the Board on the 18th August³² that "Mr Hills has proposed to launch His Majesty's Brig Hasty by the 25th instant". He went on to say "Also beg leave to inform your Honours that I have this day received by the Sheerness Long Boat Simon Bagge Master, the copper stores for the use of His Majesty's Brig Hasty and Brigantine agreabl to the bill of Lading. I remain etc James Elliot" Elliot's letter was endorsed by the Board: "Acknowledge the receipt and desire Mr. Hills will launch her on the 25th inst. if she is in all respects ready and deliver her at Sheerness. Direct Sheerness officers to receive and survey her and fit her for sea".

The Argus was to be the last of the line of brigs built at Sandwich, she was commenced in September 1812 following the launch of the Hasty. Built to the design of Sir William Rule, she was to be a brig of 383 tons with a complement of 121 men, 16 × 32-pounder guns and two 6-pounders. The drawing office copy of her lines is still kept at the Maritime Museum.

A photograph of a model of this type of sloop, now at the Science Museum, is at Plate IV. By Christmas of 1812, Thomas was in serious financial trouble and wrote to the Navy Board on the 26th December, 1812:

"Sandwich Dec 26th 1812

Most Honlb. Sirs,

It is with the most painful sensation that I am necessitated to address you at which time I am laboring under the most awful circumstance, you have already in possession the information relative to my submitting myself to a commission of Bankruptcy and I hope when the case is laid before you I shall not be found deserving of censure by your Hon. Board.

I have most Hon Sir indured a severe loss in the building the four last vessels for Government, nevertheless, I should not have failed in this very presant contract had I not experienced a severe loss by the failure

³² ADM/106/1510.

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of Messrs Collens, together with a premature demand of a considerable payment for timber which by agreement was not to be paid until June, however, this person being troubled I suppose was the cause of his acting to treacherous with me in which time I should have been able to liquidated my engagements but his determination and without the smallest idea of this circumstance taking place contributed to my unfortunate situation. to avoid a prison I was necessiated to take the following steps. The last payment I received from your Hon. Board I disbursed to a shilling, I am now left penyles with a wife and four children. My situation, I beg most Hon Sirs will meet with your compassion when I soliket the favour of your notice, I hope Most Hon Sirs the necessaty of my case will plead as an excuse for the intrusion taking and upon a revisal of my losses the greatest share of which I contribute to the building of the 4 last vessels. I trust your Hon Board will be able to make some provision for me is some employment that I might make myself useful which will ever greatly acknowledge by etc. Thos Hills”.

James Elliot, the overseer, wrote to the board on the 10th January, 1813 to give them his on the spot situation report.³³

“Honlb. Sirs,

In obedience to your directions, I beg leave to inform you that yesterday Assignees were chosen to settle the affairs of Mr. Thos Hills Bankrupt. Name of the Assignees as undermentioned

John Newington Hughs of Maidstone Bank

James Lemon of Sandwich Timber Merchant

John Briggs Reynolds of Dover, Timber Merchant

William Henry Tuesby of High St. Borough Ironmonger

Thomas Nuell of Nicholas Lane Lombard Street Gentleman

signed James Elliot
Overseer”

One of the creditors John Reynolds, of Dover, was quickly off the mark and the next day, the 11th January, wrote to the Board offering his services to finish the brig.³⁴

“Biggen Street

Dover January 11th 1813

Honourable Gentlemen,

Being a Creditor of Thomas Hills, Shipbuilder of Sandwich a Bankrupt, and understanding he has a Sloop in an unfinished state, now building for his Majesty’s Service, admitting the assignees do not

³³ ADM/106/1510.

³⁴ ADM/106/1613.

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wish to take upon themselves to finish her, I take the liberty of offering my services for that purpose should your Lordships be disposed to submit your proposals to me for that purpose. Requesting the favour of a few lines in answer, I subscribe myself, Honourable Gentlemen,
Yours very respectfully Jn. Reynolds”

On the 20th James Leman, of Sandwich, described as a timber merchant by Elliot the overseer in his letter of the 10th January, but variously described elsewhere as shopkeeper, merchant and shipowner, wrote to the Navy Board attempting to obtain financial credit for the partially completed Argus and the remaining materials.³⁵

“Honourable Sirs,

The receipt of your letter of the 14th instant respecting the completion of the engagement entered into by the Bankrupt Hills for building the Argus Gun Brig, I have the Honor to acknowledge.

A meeting of the assignees has this day been held on behalf of which I am requested to state that as the assets and effects of the Bankrupt are so inconsiderable as to admit only of a very trifling dividend as my colleagues and myself are unacquainted with the nature and art of shipbuilding we offer to the honourable Commissioners with due deference to resign the vessel and all such timber and materials as are serviceable and already provided for her completion into their hands at a fair valuation.

I have the Honor to be, Honble Sirs
Your very obedt. and hble. Servt.
Jas. Leman

Sandwich
January 20 1813.”

The Board had ideas of their own in the matter, however, and the letter from Leman is endorsed: “Ask Mr. Reynolds whether he is willing to finish this vessel upon the terms agreed upon by Mr. Hills abating such sums as have already paid and the value of such work as he has performed since the last payment”. This was obviously in response to John Reynolds’ letter of the 11th January. Leman on the 28th January impatient for a reply to his letter of the 20th had the cheek to hasten the Board for a reply to his letter. “On behalf of the assignees of Thomas Hills I am directed to call the attention of the Commissioners of the Navy to the letter of the said assignees forwarded some days since, respecting the Argus Gun Brig; and with all possible deference to request that the said commissioners will have the goodness to communicate thro’ me their commands upon the

³⁵ ADM/106/1561.

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subject as soon as possible. The assignees being very anxious to come to some decision upon the affairs of the Bankrupt.” The letter was merely endorsed by the Board: “To wait until we get an answer to our letter to Mr. Reynolds”. Although Reynolds’ reply to the Navy Board does not remain amongst the records of the PRO, an endorsement by the Board of a later letter shows that Reynolds declined to complete the vessel on the Board’s terms. At this stage a firm of ironmongers of Southwark, by the name of Tuesby and Cooper, appear on the scene. Apparently, they were the sureties for Thomas Hills’ contract with the Board and were anxious to shed responsibility for any further hand in the affair. They wrote to the Board on the 19th February, 1813.³⁶

“221 Boro Feby 19th 1813

Honourable Gentlemen,

I beg leave with submission to your Honourable Board to state that myself with my partner Joseph Cooper were sureties with Thomas Hills of Sandwich for building a vessell called the Argus and that the said Thomas Hills did sometime in January last become a Bankrupt which prevented him from finishing the said vessell pursuant to his contract. Your petitioner was and still is very desirous of finishing the vessell and have written Mr. Leman of Sandwich and Mr. Reynolds of Dover requesting them to do so, but, this morning your petitioners received a letter from Mr. Matson the solicitor for the commissioners saying they were determined not to proceed with her any further. Thus situated your petitioners humbly sollicite the friendly consideration of your Honourable Board that your petitioners and his partner may be released from the responsible situation in which they now stand with your Honourable Board waiting with due submission your Honors reply.

I am with the greatest respect
Your Honors most Dutiful & Obedient Servant
W H Tuesby.

Note: Reynolds of Dover has written two or more letters to your Honors soliciting to be employed in finishing this vessell. An assignee your Honors will see this man has given up the trust reposed in him by Hills creditors and seeks pecuniary benefits for himself at the hands of your Honourable Board.”

The letter is endorsed “Write to Mr Bicknell” (the Admiralty Solicitor) “to take measures for obtaining possession for His Majesty”. Tuesby again wrote to the Navy Board on the 4th of March, 1813, telling of a meeting at Canterbury with the assignees on the 27th

³⁶ ADM/106/1643.

February, 1813, at which he had unsuccessfully proposed the completion of the *Argus* by the assignees and suggesting that the Board should distrain on the effects of Thomas Hills, the cost to "be Borne by the creditors at large". Meanwhile, back at Sandwich, some means had to be found by Thomas of keeping the wolf from the door. The township rallied round and on the 4th March, 1813, sent a petition to the local M.P., Mr. Joseph Maryatt, requesting "the favour of you to procure Thomas Hills, a Freeman of this Corporation a carpenters warrant for one of His Majesty's Frigates" and in another hand is added "In ordinary at Chatham". The petition is signed by Joseph Stewart, now the Mayor, and the other members of the corporation. Joseph Maryatt from his address at Great George Street, London, forwarded the petition on to "The Right Honble the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty" on the 8th March.³⁷ He also added a short personal note addressed to Mr. J. Croker, Esq., "I will thank you to lay the inclosed application before the Board. To add to poor Hills misfortunes he is, though an excellent Ship-Carpenter, both old and deaf and therefore unfit for active service at sea".

It would appear from the PRO records that the petition was in vain and Thomas was not employed by the Navy as a ship's carpenter at Chatham or, for that matter, at any other place.

By the end of April, the matter of the completion was firmly in the hands of the Admiralty solicitor and on the 29th April Mr. Bicknell writing to the Board was able to give the final answer to the question of who was to finish the *Argus*.³⁸

"Spring Gardens Terrace.
29th April, 1813.

Gentlemen,

In obedience to your Honors directions, signified to me in your letter of the 8th ultimo, (stating that a contract had been entered into on the 23rd June, 1812, with Mr. Thomas Hills, Shipbuilder of Sandwich, for building for His Majesty's Service a Sloop, which had been since named the *Argus*, and he having become Bankrupt, his Assignees and Sureties decline to complete the vessel, agreeably to the Contract) that I should take the necessary measures for obtaining possession of the Sloop for his Majesty, and put the Bond in force, which was given for building her, against his Sureties, I take the liberty to acquaint your Honors, that I have caused application to be made to Messrs Tuesby and Cooper, of the Borough of Southwark, Ironmongers, the Sureties of the said Thomas Hills, for payment of the penalty of the Bond, who

³⁷ ADM/1/4705.

³⁸ ADM/106/1768.

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in reply thereto have acquainted me that under all the circumstances, they have determined to finish the vessel, agreeably to the contract, and that they have acquainted your Honors with such their determination, I therefore wait your further directions on the occasion.

I am, Gentlemen

With great respect, Your Honors most
obedient and most humble servant
Cha. Bicknell”.

By this time Messrs. Tuesby and Cooper had been brought completely to heel as their letter of the 12th May, 1813, showed.³⁹

“221 Borough May 12 1813

May it please your Honors

We have to acknowledge your Honors consent to our finishing the Argus Sloop agreeable to Thomas Hills contract which we undertake to do, but as we find there will be some time lost in getting fitt and proper Workmen, we solicit your Honors will make a small extention for Launching her viz the latest spring tides in September. and we further pray your Honors will take her afloat in Sandwich haven taking our situation into your consideration we submit to your Goodness and liberality relying upon any indulgence you can show us and we beg to be informed if we are to take her at the price she has been valued at by your surveyors and also the materials upon the premises which are useful in completing the same upon the terms as valued by the same surveyors as we wish to sett too on Monday next your Honors will we humbly beg give us the earliest information upon what we have herein submitted to your Honors we remain with the greatest submission:

Your most devoted and Obedient Servants
Tuesby & Cooper”.

The Board was good enough to settle for a fair compromise with Tuesby and Cooper and the letter from Tuesby is endorsed: “Acquaint them that we agree to their completing her at the same price and on the same conditions as Mr. Hills was to have done and will allow to the last springs in September next for her being launched after which they must deliver at their own expense and risk at Sheerness as we can have no concern with her at Sandwich. The valuation which has been made of the Ship and the Stores now of no importance between us. Acquaint the Overseer of our having agreed with them to finish her upon the same terms as Mr. Hills was to have done”. The assignees were not, however, very pleased with the Navy Board’s solution to the problem and had by this time put their affairs in the hands of Messrs. Egan and

³⁹ ADM/106/1643.

Co. solicitors of 3, Gray's Inn Square. In a letter of the 2nd June 1813 they tried for their clients' pound of flesh.⁴⁰

"Gentlemen,

The assignees of Mr. Hills of Sandwich who previous to his Bankruptcy had contracted to build a vessel for the Commissioners of the Navy, have understood that a Mr. Cooper has in consequence of such failure engaged with the Board to compleat the Contract. We take the liberty of addressing this letter to you in order to ascertain if such is the fact, and whether the assignees will be authorised in allowing Mr. Cooper to take possession of the convertible timber that was some time since seized on the part of the Board belonging to Mr. Hills and valued at £726.

They are desirous to know how they stand affected by the fresh contract and humbly hope the Board will consider that they are under the circumstances entitled to be repaid such sum of £726 and they are also anxious to be informed, whether they are to look to Mr. Cooper for the payment or whether it is a transaction that will be concluded by the Board.

I have the honor to be Gentlemen

Your most obedient and humble servant

Egan etc.,"

The Board had no doubts about their rights in the matter, they had certainly paid for a great part of the stock of timber and on the basis of the valuation made by Superintendent Hellyer, of Chatham yard, and the overseer James Elliot they were prepared to allow the assignees to have credit only for the balance of articles not paid for with public money. The letter from Egan is endorsed: "Acquaint them that we have entered into an agreement with Messrs Cooper and Tuesby to compleat this Ship according to the contract made with Thomas Hills and that they will be authorised to let them have possession of the timber which has been seized and that we shall pay for such articles that have not already been paid for by Imprest to Mr. Hills according to the valuation of them made by Supt. Hellyer and Mr. Elliot."

The final word in the saga of the building of the Argus, is spoken by Tuesby and Cooper who, no doubt with a sigh of relief, put pen to paper on October 12th, 1813 to tell of the launching and subsequent voyage of the Argus to Sheerness.⁴¹

"London Oct. 12 1813

May it please your Honors,

We in conformity to our contract launched the Argus Sloop on

⁴⁰ ADM/106/1510.

⁴¹ ADM/106/1643.

SHIPBUILDING AT SANDWICH

Saturday September the 11th but from the long prevalence of North and North East Winds she has not been able to leave Sandwich haven untill last Friday she is arrived safe at Sheerness and we humbly intreat your honors will be pleased to order a final survey upon her as soon as possible which will greatly oblige your Honors

Most grateful and Obedient, Humble Servants
Tuesby & Cooper

221 Boro”.

The Naval estimates for 1813 show the Argus at a cost of £5,095 for hull, masts and yards and an additional £2,040 for rigging and stores, a total of £7,135 for the completed ship. She was sold out of the service to a Mr. Sedger some 15 years later on the 26th March, 1828, for £1,110.

The completion of the Argus saw the end of shipbuilding for the Royal Navy at Sandwich and the end of shipbuilding by the Hills family. The root cause of Thomas Hills' bankruptcy is not clear; it is fairly obvious that unless careful financial control was maintained over the construction of ships, it would be very easy for debts incurred in the construction of earlier ships to be passed on to subsequent contracts, using funds paid by the Navy Board for later ships to pay timber bills incurred in the construction of earlier vessels. It is perhaps significant that Andrew Hills, the father of Thomas, had died on the 13th June, 1811, at the age of 75. He had successfully managed the shipbuilding business for many years at Sandwich and had also inherited a considerable sum of money from the death of his brother, uncle to Thomas, Captain John Hills, RN, who had died of yellow fever whilst in command of the *Hermione* 32 in the West Indies in 1794. On his death, however, in 1811, Andrew did not leave a penny to his eldest surviving son, Thomas; whether he considered that his son had been sufficiently provided for during his lifetime and the business was obviously solvent in 1811, or whether he doubted his son's business acumen and foresaw the collapse, it is not possible to say. Without doubt other small shipbuilders were experiencing difficulties at the same time and two cases are of interest. Firstly, Mr. William Taylor of Bideford, Devon, who is shown in the return of 1804 as having a small yard at Bideford employing 14 men. He petitioned the Navy Board in January 1814 regarding his losses in the building of a bomb vessel called the *Belzebug* of 325 tons.

“4th January, 1814

To the Honourable the Commissioners and principal officers of His Majesty's Navy

The humble Petition of William Taylor of Bideford in the County of Devon Shipbuilder
SHEWETH

That your Petitioner in the year 1813 built for his Majesty's use the Bomb Vessel called Belzebub of the Burthen of Three Hundred and twenty five Tons by Admeasurement, at the price of Twenty three Pounds per ton, pursuant to a contract entered into by your Petitioner with your honourable Board for the purpose and that your Petitioner caused the said vessel to be delivered at his Majesty's Dock Yard Plymouth, pursuant to the same contract. That from your Petitioners inexperience in regard to vessels of this description and to the quantity of large timber which such a vessel would consume, your Petitioner having never beforeseen a vessel of the description, he contracted for building the Belzebub at too small a price per ton, and your Petitioner has in consequence sunk fifteen hundred pounds and upwards in building and completing her, which will long be severely felt by your Petitioner and his large family.

Your Petitioner therefore humbly prays that your honourable Board will be pleased to re-imburse him the whole or such portion of his loss as in your discretion you may think proper.

And your petitioner as in duty bound will pray
Signed Wm Taylor.

Borough Town and Manor of
Bideford in the County of Devon

The above named William Taylor was sworn to the truth of the above petition on the 29th day of December, 1813, Before me Thos Burnard Justice."

Secondly, the case of Mr. Robert Davey, of Topsham, who had contracted for two bomb vessels, The Vesuvius and the Terror. Davy had a small business at Wear, near Topsham, employing 10 men.⁴²

"Topsham Aug 31st 1813"

Honorable Sirs,

When I received the copy of the contract and draft for the Bomb Vessuvius and Terror, I hesitated whether I should build them or forfeit the penalty; but having done a great deal of work for your Honorable Board and I trust to your Honors satisfaction, I determined to go on with them, and having completed the said vessels and delivered them at Portsmouth Dock Yard, I can now state with certainty and truth they have cost me from £800 to a thousand pounds each more than the contract price which price is not sufficient to pay

⁴² ADM/106/1501.

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for the bare Hull, they have a line of Battle Ships Bottom and a Frigates frame, the Tonnage only 325 Tons but what I have to complain of is the *internal works*, the nature of which I was entirely ignorant the draft and particulars of the same not having been shewn in the drawing room before the day of Tender so that my agent had not any opportunity of letting me know them. Having built a *Fire* ship, and never having seen a Bomb vessel, thought the internal works may have cost me some what similar which was from 10 to 15 Shillings per Ton, but have to my cost found the Bomb beds have taken at least 50 Tons of fine square timbers each fit to make Frigates Beams, the labour and time very great indeed in completing them there have also been various alterations while the works were going on which has been attended with considerable expense. I trust your Honors will be satisfied that I am not making an unnecessary complaint when you reflect that no builder would take the others tho 50 Tons larger and at least £1,000 better for the man that should build them for anything like the same.

I should be happy if your Honors where to direct the Portsmouth Yard officers to report what such vessels would cost the building to convince (if necessary) how much the contract price is below the real expense in building such kind of ship I am sure your Honors can have no wish that an individual should sustain so heavy a loss arising solely from ignorance of not knowing the internal works which I have been required to do, I trust and beg your Honors will be pleased to take my very hard case into consideration and allow me payment for the Bomb beds as extra work or such other compensation as they may in justice think proper.

I am your Honors most
humble and obedient
servant
Robert Davy.”

Mr. Davy was not to get his extra money and the letter is endorsed by the Board “Acknowledge receipt and inform Mr. Davey that his agent was shown the manner of fitting the Bomb Beds, at the same time he was informed of the quantity of timber that building the Bomb Vessel would require and with respect to alterations we do not know of any that have caused him additional expence. Done with”.

The run down of the Royal Navy following the collapse of Napoleon was rapid. 1814 shows a total of 644 ships in commission, a year later this figure was down to 485 and by 1817 the figure of ships in commission had fallen to 124. Alongside these figures must also be considered the number of ships put out by the Navy for construction in the merchant yards. These dropped from 60 contracts in 1813 to only 6 in 1815. At the same time the Royal Navy was selling its surplus ships

to what would otherwise presumably have been a civilian market for the merchant yards. In 1815 alone 222 ships were either sold or taken to pieces by the Navy against a more normal wastage of 15 per year during the war years. It is no wonder that Laker commenting on the period, in his history of Deal, has to say: "The prosperous years which the town had enjoyed during the French Wars were, on the conclusion of peace succeeded by years of great adversity. Many circumstances contributed to this. First and foremost the large fleets which had been year after year, assembled in the Downs were now disbanded or stationed elsewhere. This caused great distress among, the boatmen who had acted as pilots to these ships or had driven a thriving trade in supplying their wants. The men fell back upon their ancient profession of smuggling, and endeavoured to eke out a scanty livelihood by this means; but the Government, freed from all apprehension of foreign invasion and having now no need of the services of the smugglers as newagents launched out on a policy of severe repression. Speculators, too, who had laid out their money in the military centre, now found their schemes going awry. The numerous embarkations had attracted great numbers of people to the town and this in turn provided a rich harvest for the tradesmen. Now the latter found their trade dwindling or ruined. Bankruptcies became common; the workhouses were filled every three weeks a poor rate was made of 1/- in the pound on the then rateable value; seventeen poor-books were made every year on an average; five hundred children sent to the poor house to be fed every day; and from four hundred to five hundred inmates lodged in the two houses in West Street. The wives and families and other relatives of officers, both naval and military had come to Deal to live during the years of the war; there was now a general exodus of these from the town. The two minor industries of the place, boat building and rope-making, felt the altered conditions and fell into comparative decay".

The shipwrights departed, to try their luck elsewhere, to the London river, Dublin and the north of England, where work was still to be found and shipbuilding, of any significance, came to an end on the banks of the Stour.

APPENDIX A. SHIPS BUILT AT SANDWICH FOR THE ROYAL NAVY BY ANDREW AND THOMAS HILLS BETWEEN 1781 AND 1813

Name of Vessel	Begun	Launched	Tons	Guns	Built by	Designed by	Remarks
Otter	Aug 1781	Mar 1782	202	10	Andrew Hills	Sir J. Williams	Sold 16 Dec 1801 for £1,000
Falcon	Aug 1781	Apr 1782	202	10	Andrew Hills	Sir J. Williams	Burnt as a Fire Ship Dunkirk Roads 7 Jul 1800
Weazle	Sep 1782	Apr 1783	202	10	Andrew Hills	Sir J. Williams	Lost 11 Jan 1799
Ferret			202	10	Andrew Hills	Sir J. Williams	
Hound	Dec 1795	May 1796	313	16	Andrew Hills	Sir J. Henslow	Lost Oct 1800. Sloop rigged as a Brig
Satellite	Sep 1805	Mar 1806	282	14	Thomas Hills	Sir W. Rule	Foundered in the Channel 19 Jan 1811
Recruit	Apr 1806	Aug 1806	383	18	Thomas Hills	Sir W. Rule	Sold 7 Aug 1822 for £1,050
Royalist	May 1806	Jan 1807	383	18	Thomas Hills	Sir W. Rule	Sold to Mr. Harper for £1,130 3 Feb 1819
Arachne	Sep 1808	Feb 1809	383	18	Thomas Hills	Sir W. Rule	Sloop Ship rigged. Sold to Mr. Sedger Jan 1837 for £1,110
Castilian	Oct 1808	May 1809	383	18	Thomas Hills	Sir W. Rule	Taken to pieces Oct 1829
Manly	Feb 1812	Jul 1812	180	12	Thomas Hills	Sir W. Rule	Sloop rigged as a Brig. Sold 12 Dec 1833 for £550
Hasty	1812	1812	180	12	Thomas Hills	Sir W. Rule	Sloop rigged as a Brig
Argus	Sep 1812	Sep 1813	383	18	Thomas Hills	Sir W. Rule	Sold to Mr. Sedger 26 Mar 1828 for £1,110

B. F. HILLS

APPENDIX C. SHIPWRIGHTS EMPLOYED IN MERCHANTS YARDS—APRIL
1804

(Totals include Apprentices)

Northfleet 78	Gravesend 17	Gillingham 6
Queenborough 4		
Stroud 11		
Rochester 12	Chatham 38	
Milton 3		
Faversham 7	Sandwich 8	
Whitstable 12	Margate 11	
Broadstairs 17		
Ramsgate 38		
Deal 23 (Boatbuilders)		
Dover 123	Hythe 15	
Folkestone 11	Sandgate 8	

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APPENDIX B. GENEALOGICAL CHART

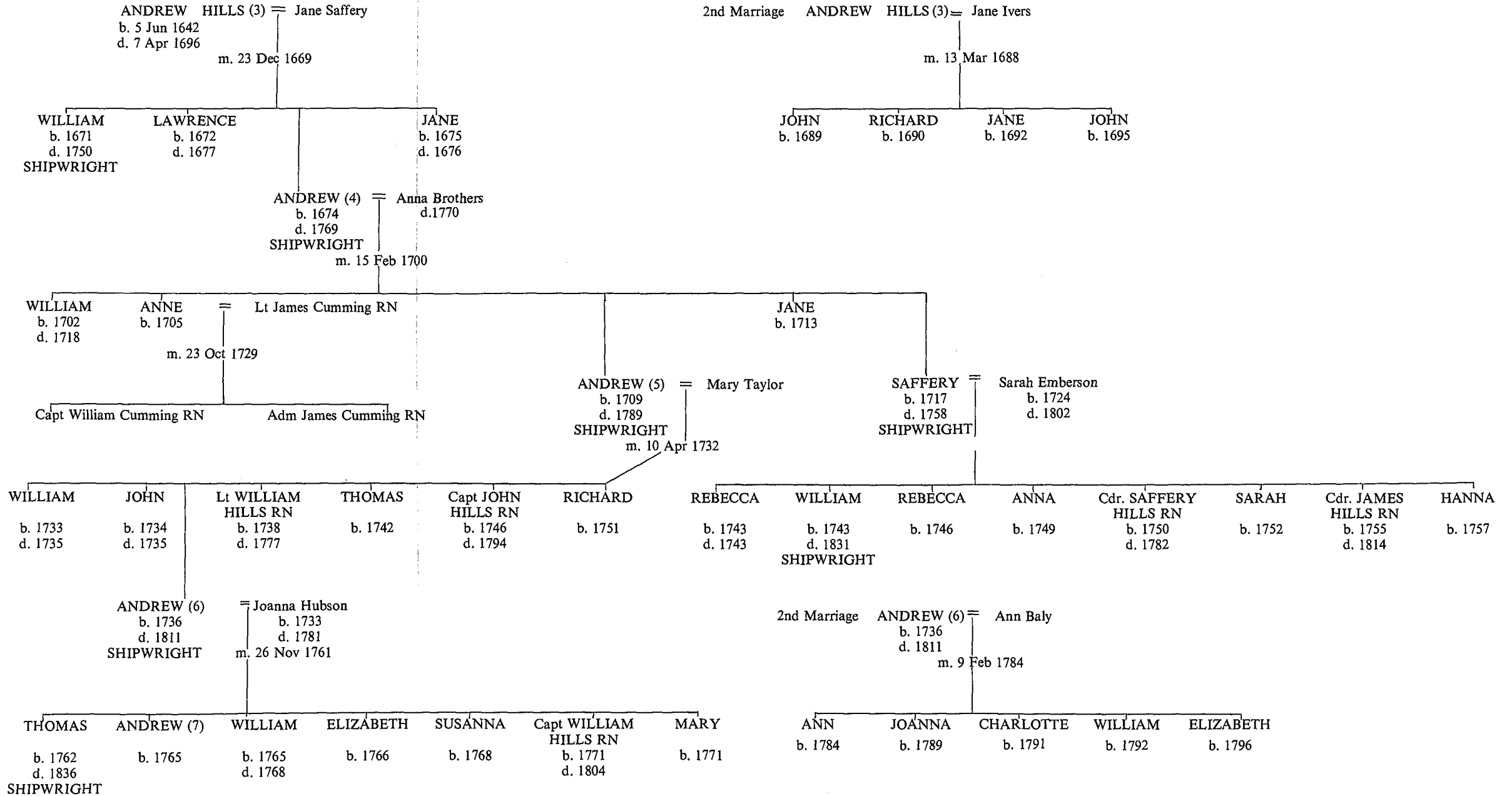
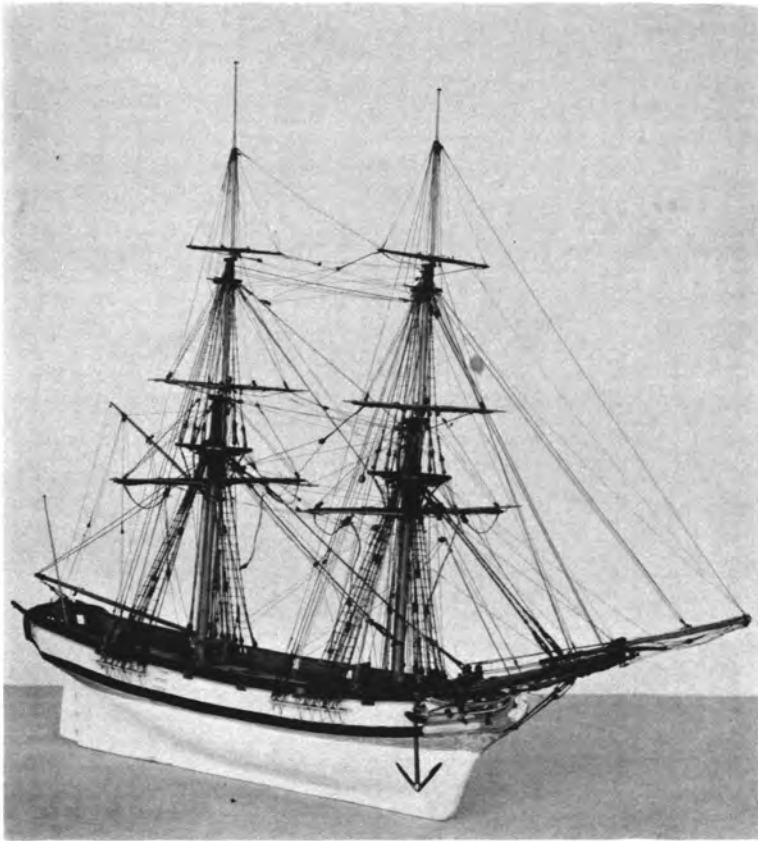
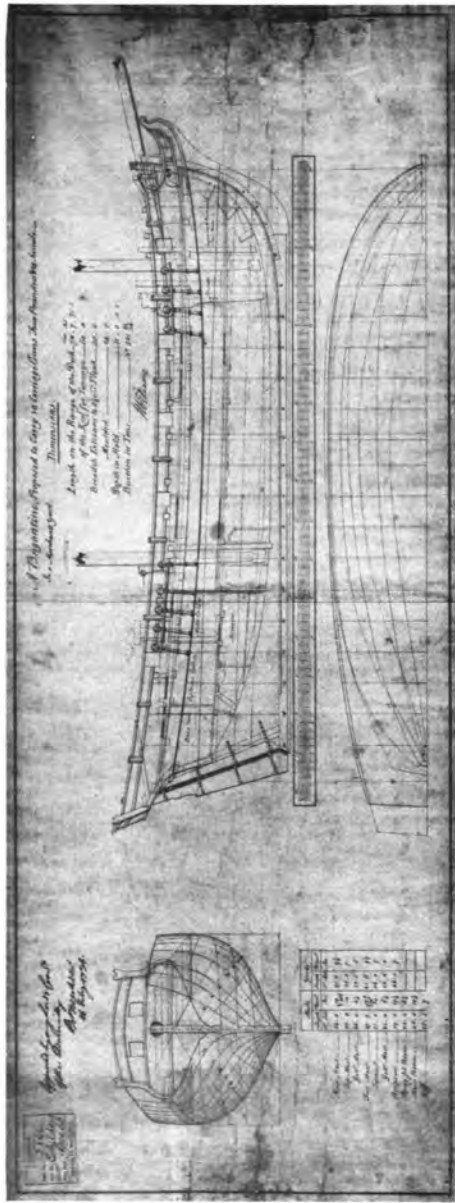


PLATE I



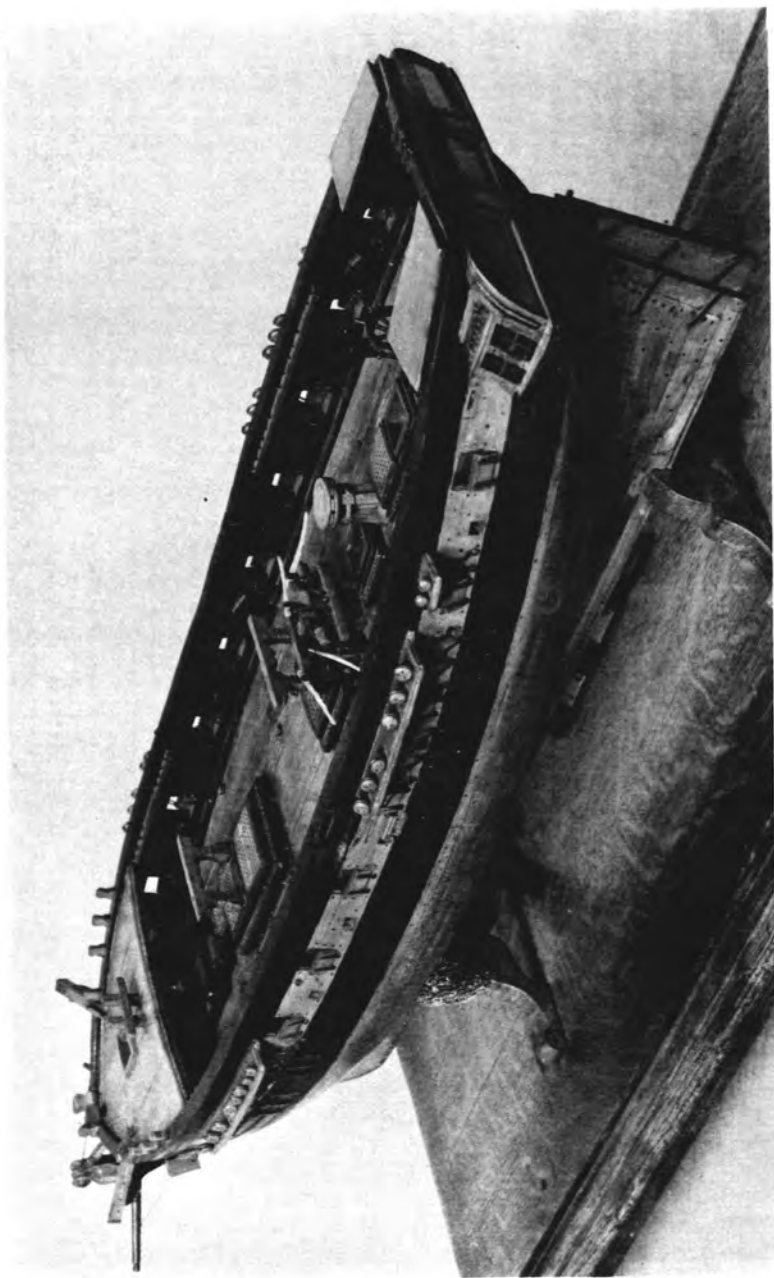
10-Gun Brig 'Alert'. Starboard Bow. (*Crown Copyright. Science Museum, London.*)



Lines, Childers Class Brig. (National Maritime Museum.)



View of the Docks, Deptford, by N. Pocock. (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich Hospital Collection.)



18-Gun Brig, c. 1800. Stern. (Photo. Science Museum, London.)