

Cornubia - A True Cornish Legend Of The Sea

Written by Andy Owen



About 6 miles from where I am sitting right now, is Hayle, a small port on an inlet of St. Ives Bay on the north coast of Cornwall.

On Saturday 27th February 1858 - the first big iron paddle steamer built in Cornwall, was launched at the dockyard of shipbuilders Harvey & Company.

The ship was called **Cornubia** - which is the Romano-Latin name for Cornwall.

She was to have an extraordinary life.

Cornubia was built by Harvey & Company - a company who had built a fine reputation for stationary beam engines for pumping water out of the deep Cornish tin and copper mines.

The engines they produced were exported all over the world. They were - and still are - the largest beam engines ever constructed.

Harveys also built ocean-going ships. The Cornubia was destined to be the most famous. By a long way...

It was reported that close to 5,000 people turned up to watch the launch. She cost £18,000 to build. That equates to around £1.8 million in today's money.

She was 210 feet long, 24 feet 6 inches wide. Her draft was 9 feet.

She was a very fast and powerful ship for her time. Powered by 2 Harvey steam engines, with 4 boilers and 2 side wheels, she had the capability of an astonishing top speed of 30 knots. She had a crew of around 24.

Cornubia was built to provide a packet and ferry service between Hayle, St Ives and Bristol.

Cornwall was, in a lot of ways, rather isolated from the rest of England in those days and did not have a through railway service. This changed when the Royal Albert Bridge over the Tamar, was completed in 1859 and the Great Western Railway soon provided a service right down the peninsula to Penzance.

Cornubia was sleek and a 'head turner'. She was painted white and had two funnels close together amidships, with a high bridge over her paddle wheels.

She had a most impressive interior, too.

Here's how the *Western Daily Press* described her, on Monday 19th July 1858:

"A capacious house, with plate-glass windows, tastefully designed, afforded two entrances to the cabin stairs.

And the hundreds of visitors who, on Tuesday afternoon, came on board to 'have a peep at the new boat' went down those stairs with a sense of being about to look on 'something out of the common run'.

Nor were they disappointed. A more superb cabin they could scarcely have seen before. About a dozen mahogany velvet covered sofas occupied the sides of the capacious room, with velvet covered chairs to match. The panelling of the ceiling was white, with chaste gold mouldings. The side panels were maple, mahogany and satin wood, with the most elegant of gold moulding.

All presented a rich and tasteful appearance, and elicited general commendation. The sleeping berths were well arranged, and proper ventilation was provided throughout.

No, the most fastidious and aristocratic of steamboat travellers could certainly find no fault here - all was perfection".

After her sea trials, Cornubia commenced service on 5th July, with a trip from Hayle around Land's End, to Penzance, The Lizard and Falmouth.

She then commenced the regular 3 or 4 trips a month service between Bristol, Hayle and St Ives on 8th July, which continued until 1861. Occasionally, she would also call at Ilfracombe.

In 1861, her life and career changed. *Significantly.*

In November 1861, she was sold to Thomas Sterling Begbie - a London shipbroker who was acting for the Confederate Navy. She was one of only 4 ships owned outright by the Confederate Navy.

Begbie put her to work initially on the London-Southampton-Vigo-Oporto-Lisbon route, before taking her across the Atlantic on 11th November 1862, via a rather circuitous route.

She arrived at the Azores on 21st November, then sailed from there to Madeira and onwards to Bermuda, where she arrived on 1st December.

After a short stay she sailed to the USA, to perform the duties she had clearly been purchased for - to operate as a blockade-runner for the Confederate States.

Before she started her new duties, she was officially renamed *Lady Davis*, but records appear to show that her old name of *Cornubia* was also still used. She was also painted a 'light lead colour'.

She was immediately effective in her new role. She was fast and manoeuvrable and her shallow 9ft draft gave her an excellent advantage as a blockade-runner.

Her first trip was from Wilmington to Charlestown, where she arrived on 19th January 1863 after 71 hours at sea. She delivered 300 bales of cotton and 80 barrels of rosin and turpentine.

She was chased by a US steamer, but easily outran her.

She made the return trip on 25th February in 66 days. On board was a large quantity of arms and ammunition.



The Routes Of the Confederate Blockade Runners

On average, the blockade runners made about 4 successful trips through the Union Navy warships during their service. *Cornubia* successfully avoided and outran Union forces on 22 occasions.

She had become a maritime superstar, continually bringing vital cargoes to the Confederate Army at Wilmington.



Wilmington Harbour

The Union Navy wanted to stop her very badly, but they simply couldn't catch her and despite some close calls, she continued to be very effective.

But, on 8th November 1863, her luck ran out.

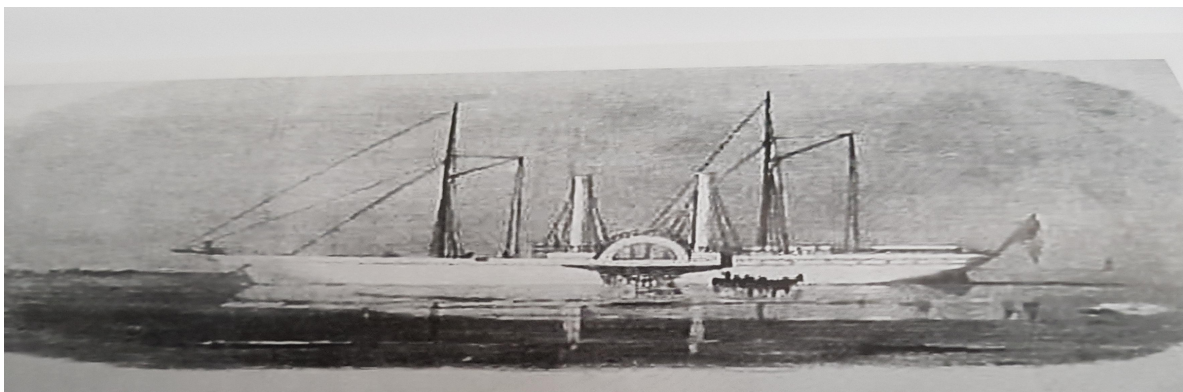
Her 23rd voyage was to be her last for the Confederates.

She was cleverly pursued by Union Navy blockader USS Nippon - and the Cornubia's Captain had no alternative but to beach her, 11 miles north of New Inlet, close to Wilmington.

The Captain, carpenter and one seaman stayed on board while the officers, crew and passengers all escaped to shore. By 0300, the Nippon was joined by USS James Adger who towed Cornubia free on the flood tide, totally intact.

There was much jubilation in the Union ranks. Cornubia was a major prize.

She was sent to Boston, together with her cargo, the three captives and a bag of water-soaked mail, which one of her officers had tried to dispose of in the surf.



The abandoned mail was an important catch for the Union.

It gave them a real insight into the Confederacy plans and in particular, it confirmed their opinions that British seamen were playing a key role in blockade running.

At the time of her capture, she was, in fact, *Lady Davis*, as she had been renamed when a new *Cornubia* came out in June/ July. But her captors still referred to her as *Cornubia*.

They clearly knew her strengths - and she was purchased from the Boston Prize Court in November for \$65,000 and commissioned as the CSS *Cornubia* on 17th March 1864.

She was refitted with a 20-pounder rifled gun and two 24-pounder smooth bore cannons. She was given her own class name - the only *Cornubia* class vessel in the US Navy.

She was immediately assigned to the West Gulf Blockading Squadron and she sailed for New Orleans on 18th April 1864, arriving on the 8th May.

She patrolled the waters off Mobile and around Pensacola until she was ordered to report for blockade duty off the coast of Texas, remaining on this duty until the end of the war.

She was as successful for the Union Navy as she was for the Confederates - probably even more so.

Some of her successes included salvaging 89 bales of cotton thrown overboard by a blockade-runner off Galveston on 20th April 1865. She also captured the schooner *Chaos* with valuable cotton cargo on 21st April

She boarded the guard boat *Le Compt* at Galveston on 24th May and threw a 24-pounder Howitzer overboard, as well as capturing small arms and a compass.

On the same day, she assisted in the destruction of the steamer *Denbigh* carrying important mail. After the evacuation of Galveston on 22nd May *Cornubia* removed harbour obstructions.

The blockade runner had now become a blockader.

On 21st July she put to sea for Philadelphia, arriving on the 3rd August 1865.

She was decommissioned on 9th August 1865 and sold on the 25th October 1865.

What happened in the next six years, is a bit of a mystery. She had become the '*New England*', but what she did, where she went, is not recorded at all.

In 1871, she reappeared and her engines were removed. She became a trader under sail. She travelled thousands of miles, from the Baltic to the USA to Northern Europe, crossing the Atlantic 8 times.

Cornubia sailed over 130,000 miles in her lifetime. From the Bristol Channel and North Cornwall - to successful careers with the Confederate and Union Navies - plus Atlantic crossings and who knows what else.

She was a very special ship indeed.

She disappeared forever from maritime records in 1878.

Harvey's of Hayle were at their peak in the early to mid 1800's.



But, as the Cornish mining industry began to slowly die, the business declined. They bought the Cornish Copper Company in 1875, but the engineering works and foundry were closed in 1903.

The shipyard was closed the following year.

They continued to trade in building supplies. In 1957, the firm bought the timber merchant, Fox, Stanton & Co. and also began selling heating oil.

In 1961 they relinquished control of Porthleven Harbour.

In 1969, Harvey & Co. became part of United Builders Merchants Ltd and traded as UBM Harvey until 1983. Harvey Holdings - including the whole port of Hayle - were then divided into 10 lots and sold for redevelopment.

The original offices of Harvey & Co. and the red brick Foundry House have been Grade II* listed buildings since the company's closure in 1983.

The Cornubia Inn, was built by local brewer Christopher Ellis in 1867.

Located in the centre of Hayle, this famous old Inn is now Grade Two listed and was named after the SS Cornubia, born less than a mile from her front door.

