

WHITE STAR AUSTRALIAN PACKETS

Extracts from a paper read by
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- before -

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IN tracing the history of Liverpool shipping during the 50's of last century, one might say that gold and its spell, has been the cause of most of the tragedy and evil in this world, and also of nearly all its good and progress.

The discovery of gold in Australia was made by Edward H. Hargreaves in January, 1851, and tales of the fabulous fortunes that were being washed out of the ground and being picked up in the shape of nuggets of gold attracted large numbers of emigrants from this country.

Every man was anxious to get out to the goldfields to secure a fortune as quickly as possible before the diggings were worked out. Before that discovery the emigrant ships between Liverpool and Australia, indeed between the whole of the British Isles and Australia, were of a very poor type.

A five months' passage in ill-ventilated and overcrowded 'tween decks could only be compared to the conditions in the old convict ships. But, on the rush of emigrants to the new El Dorado, the trade at one bound became one of the most important in the mercantile marine of the world. The time had passed when Government regulations were needed, as competition automatically improved the emigrant ships out of all recognition.

CHIEF EMIGRATION PORT

Everyone, naturally, was in a violent hurry to get out to Melbourne, and they took passage in the ships which were noted for speed. Through the enterprise of the ship-owners of Liverpool in ordering new ships, Liverpool soon became the chief emigration port in the British Isles, and Liverpool gained a name for speedy passages. The most prominent firms in the Liverpool emigration trade were Gibbs, Bright and Co., James Baines, Pilkington and Wilson, James Beazley and Co., Henry Fox, Miller's and Thompson, and Fernie Brothers.

Many of these firms were brokers before being owners, and very often the ships mentioned in their sailing lists were chartered by them. The owners of the White Star Line, John Pilkington and Henry Threlfall Wilson, had started in the shipbroking business as early as 1845. John Pilkington was born in 1820, the son of Christopher Pilkington, a master mariner who founded the firm of Pilkington Bros. Henry Threlfall

Wilson, the son of John Wilson, emigration agent, of 74, Waterloo-road, was born in Liverpool in 1825. On April 29, 1845, John Pilkington's mother, Judith, died at the age of 58, and in that year he and Wilson commenced business as shipbrokers in Prince's Buildings, 26, North John-street.

Their first advertised sailing was on February 26, 1846, when they loaded the brig Elizabeth for Montreal. In August of the same year they moved their office to 20, Water-street. The following year they were despatching ships to Boston and New York, and were agents in Liverpool for American-owned vessels. On June 28, 1849, they first advertised their "White Star Line of Boston Packets," as brokers for ships to New York, New Orleans, Boston and Charleston. These were all American-owned ships.

SHAREHOLDERS

James Chambers, who later became closely connected with the firm, was at the same time advertising James Chambers and Co.'s White Star Line of American and Australian packets from 61, Waterloo-road, with the same ships appearing in his sailing lists as were in Pilkington and Wilson's.

James Chambers was the eldest son of Isaac Chambers, who appears in the Directory of 1829 as a flour dealer living in Burlington-street. In 1841 he is entered as a corn broker at 26, Juvenal-street, but by 1847 he seems to have retired from business and settled at Ulcoats, Egremont, Cumberland, though he continued to take an interest in shipping by investing his money in the White Star ships.

On September 5, 1848, Henry Threlfall Wilson married Anne, the eldest daughter of Isaac Chambers. In 1853, both Isaac and his son James were large shareholders in the newly-formed White Star Line of Australian Packets. Isaac Chambers held a half share with Wilson in two ships, David Cannon and Iowa, and James Chambers held eight shares in the Fitzjames. In the Red Jacket, Isaac held 12 shares and James five. In the Golden Era, Isaac held 13 and James four, whilst in the Mermaid, Isaac held 12 shares. In the Emma the majority of the shares were held by Pilkington's relations. His father, Christopher, held 16, his uncle, Daniel, four, and his brother, Richard, four. Their ship, the White Star, was bought by them in

January, 1855, and Pilkington and Wilson held 43 shares in her, with Richard Wright, one of her builders, holding the other 21. Wilson, therefore, had the strong financial backing of his father-in-law and brother-in-law. Other shareholders besides Pilkington's relations were Cearns and Brown, Isaac Jackson, Halhead and Lord, and W. Dempster.

The first sailing of the White Star of Australian Packets was on November 25, 1852, with the *Tan-tivy*, followed by the *Defence* in February, 1853.

By this time a number of Lines were well established in the Australian trade from Liverpool. The most important were the Eagle Line of Gibbs, Bright and Co., Golden Line of Millers, Thompson; Mersey Line of Cowie; Scot and Roxburgh; Liverpool Black Ball Line of James Baines; Fox Line of Henry Fox; Liverpool Line of John Starr de Wolf; Liverpool Thistle Line of Duncan Gibb; and the Australian Line of Brice, Friend and Co.

On December 21, 1853, James Chambers married Jane Gray, the youngest daughter of John Wilson, Grove Road, Fairfield, at St. Anne's Church, Stanley. This John Wilson was, in 1852, advertising from 134, Waterloo-road as being passenger agent for Pilkington and Wilson's White Star Line.

On December 31, 1856, John Pilkington retired from the firm to manage Pilkington Bros., and James Chambers, who had joined the firm that year, combined the two firms under the name of Wilson and Chambers. By this time the firm owned a number of well-found and speedy ships, such as the *Carn-tyne*, *Fitzjames*, *Arabian*, *Mermaid*, *Shalimar*, *White Star* and *Golden Era*.

A comparison of the prices paid for their ships during the first four years of their existence is interesting. In 1852 the *Iowa* was bought for £8,500. *Arabian* and *Mermaid* in 1854 cost £14,100 and £14,850 respectively. In 1855 they paid £30,000 for the *Red Jacket*, and in 1860 the *Queen of the North* cost them £13,500.

RED JACKET AND LIGHTNING

The *Red Jacket* soon made a name for herself as a fast and comfortable ship. Launched at the same time as the *Lightning*, her greatest rival, she raced across the Atlantic against her, making the passage in 13 days, 1 hour, 25 minutes, against the *Lightning's* 13 days,

19½ hours. In six days she covered 2,020 miles, though the *Lightning* made the world's record run of 436 miles in one day. Chartered by the White Star Line, on her first voyage to Melbourne she made the passage out in 69 days 11 hours, and reached Liverpool in 73 days, making the round voyage in 5 months and 4 days, including a stay of 12 days in port. Pilkington and Wilson then bought her, and in 1858 she made the passage from Melbourne in 67 days, the fastest since 1854.

Another famous ship of the Line was the first *Blue Jacket* of 1854. Chartered by Wilson in 1855, she made a passage of 69 days to Melbourne. In 1860 she was bought for the Line. The second *Blue Jacket* was built in New Brunswick in 1858. Both ships were lost by fire at sea and, curiously enough, both about the same time and place, though in different years. The New Brunswick ship was abandoned on fire off Cape Horn in March, 1864, whilst the American-built ship was burnt off the Falklands on March 9, 1869.

In 1853, the *Fitzjames* made the passage from Melbourne to Callao in 34 days, and finished the round voyage from Liverpool to Callao, including 23 days' stay in Hobson's Bay, in 4 months and 22 days.

When the White Star Line came into existence, the sailing packets were fighting the early Atlantic steamers. The British and American tea-clippers were strenuously competing, as were the various emigrant firms to Australia. Passengers then, as now, preferred to sail again in a ship in which they had made a fast and comfortable voyage. Merchants, whose cargoes were carried swiftly and safely by some ships of a Line, continued to make shipments by that same Line. One can thus see that the House Flag was a symbol of a company's reputation for safety and speed.

PASSENGERS' COMFORT

James Baines coolly appropriated the flag of a well-known Packet Line then running between New York and Liverpool. His trick succeeded in filling his first Black Ball ship, the *Marco Polo*, with passengers. James Nico! Forbes did the rest for him by making the fastest passage ever known to that time.

The competition between the Black Ball and White Star Lines proved

of the greatest benefit to both cabin and steerage passengers, as their convenience and comfort became subjects of consideration in a manner unthought of in the old days before the discovery of gold.

The White Star Line bought another American-built ship in the *Chariot of Fame*, which, together with the *White Star*, *Blue Jacket* and *Red Jacket*, were an answer to the four fast ships of the *Black Ball Line*. The *Red Jacket* was, perhaps, the most famous of all the *White Star* fleet, as she made fast runs out and home in a consistent manner, and was one of the half-dozen ships that claimed to have run over 100 miles in the 24 hours.

But whilst the convenience of the cabin passengers was studied by the owners to an extent previously unknown, the steerage passengers were not forgotten. Strict rules were made for the conduct of the steerage passengers as early as 1852. Their health, as well as their comfort, was looked after.

In the early days, and especially during the Crimean War, when the Government had chartered all the Australian steamers, the mail contract was a big feature, and every effort was made to make fast passages. Wilson always advertised his ships as being under a penalty to make the passage in 68 days.

Speed became the dominant factor in the rivalry between the different lines. There is no doubt that guarantees like this hastened the end of a number of sailing ship owners of the last century. They no sooner had one ship built, which beat all others, than another had to be built to beat her. Wilson was like all the rest in that he was "bitten by the speed bug." He had to beat Baines' *Black Bullers* in some way or other, and to build the larger and finer ships required, he had to obtain funds. He borrowed on mortgages from the Royal Bank of Liverpool, and this so alarmed James Chambers that he retired from the firm in December, 1865. In the following January, Wilson was joined by a Mr. John Cunningham as partner.

PARTNERSHIP DISSOLVED

The Royal Bank was established on May 2, 1836. In 1847 it had to close its doors owing to having granted large credits to Messrs. Barton, Irlan and Higginson, an old-established Liverpool firm of ship-

owners who failed that year for £617,131 17s 6d. In 1848 it reopened with new capital, and by 1860 had recovered as regards its assets.

In 1866, although the bank was affected by the extraordinary series of banking and commercial disasters, it declared a dividend of 10 per cent. Again in July, 1867, a dividend of 7 per cent. was paid, but in October of the same year the bank had to close its doors. It was then found that the bank had lost about £1,168,000.

In 1865 Messrs. Seddon and Garrett owed the bank £101,000, and in May, 1866, Messrs. Wilson and Cunningham owed them £179,701. This made Wilson and Cunningham's total liabilities £370,031, being liable to other creditors for £190,000 odd. The bank, however, agreed to carry both firms on for another six years. Finally, at the end of 1867, Wilson and Cunningham owed the bank, on its stoppage, £527,000. On January 18, 1868, the partnership between Wilson and Cunningham was dissolved.

FLAG AND GOODWILL SOLD

On April 26, 1866, James Chambers had been elected a director of the Lancaster Ship-owners' Co., whose ships had been running under the *White Star* flag since the company's foundation in 1864. After his retirement from the *White Star Line* Mr. Chambers had recommenced trading under the old name of James Chambers and Co. His offices were situated in Cooper's Row, but in 1867 they were moved to 3 & 5, King-street.

When the *White Star* went into bankruptcy, Mr. Wilson sold the flag and goodwill to Thomas Henry Ismay for £1,000. James Chambers then found him a position as manager of the Lancaster Ship-owners' Co., but within a year the directors had to regretfully accept his resignation owing to ill-health.

Henry Threlfall Wilson then retired to Surbiton, Surrey, where he died on November 1, 1869, of cancer in the stomach at the age of 44 years.

His first partner, John Pilkington, lived until 1890, when he died at 41, Shrewsbury-road, Oxtou, on February 26, and was buried in Wallasey Churchyard.