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Paper : "SOME MERSEYSIDE SHIPBUILDERS"

Read to the Society by Mr. W. Stewart Rees on 12th Feb. 1944.

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Before dealing with individual shipbuilders, it seems desirable to take a general view of the position at Liverpool.

The south shore on the Lancashire coast was the site of practically all the yards, and shipbuilding in the days of oak and hemp was more picturesque and interesting than it is to-day; then on the stocks could be seen vessels in various stages of construction, some only in frame, others with their hulls partly planked; occasionally a craft would be almost completed and fully rigged, with masts and yards in position, ready for launching.

Very noticeable would be the fragrance of new cut timber, also the odours of tar, pitch and oakum. Then the grinding of the saws would be heard cutting the huge baulks of timber into the requisite sizes, while the carpenters would be seen swinging their adzes and shaping the wood, chop - chop - chop. The rhythmic blows of the caulking hammers would echo again and again, all adding to the exhilarating throb and feeling of life as the ship took form, and it is not surprising that the men were proud of their work as they gazed on the beautiful lines of the vessel before she took her plunge into the broad waters of the Mersey, thence possibly to sail on all the oceans of the globe.

In addition to the men actually employed building the vessels, a considerable number were busy as block and spar makers; then there were sailmakers, carvers (who produced such wonderful figureheads), ropemakers, painters and chandlers, all of whose services were needed before the ship was ready for sea.

These British-built oak vessels were very strongly constructed and some of them lasted a very long time, in fact there are instances of them sailing the seas for over 100 years.

Unfortunately, most of the builders' records of the early vessels constructed at this Port have /

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/disappeared, so we have only got the names of a comparatively few ships and their builders. It should be remembered, however, that most of the craft in the old days were small, while the larger ones of 300/500 tons often took the best part of a year to build. Actually, the average size of the vessels entering and leaving this Port 100 years ago was about 100 tons.

Originally below the water line, extra plank-ing, or sheathing, as it was called, was fitted, then copper sheets were provided, but eventually yellow metal sheets were produced, which were cheaper.

In order to preserve the timber, salt was laid between the beams, and it may be mentioned that the builders preferred to have their yards close to the water's edge as they considered the salt spray beneficial to the vessels while they were under construction.

It may be noted that early last century oak was beginning to get scarce, then in the 1830's iron vessels began to make their appearance, but at the start shippers were not enthusiastic as they were afraid the metal would sweat and cause damage to the cargoes.

Ten years later iron ships were coming into demand, and about 1860 steel was being employed in their construction, as it was lighter than iron, thus enabling vessels so built to carry more weight.

Between 1815 - 1820, only a limited number of small wooden paddle steamers were built, principally for ferry services, but from 1820 to 1830, larger wooden paddle steamers were constructed for the coasting trades to Ireland and Scotland, etc. Screw propellers came into use during the next decade; on the other hand, paddles continued in favour for many years.

It might be observed that when steamers first came into use the shipowners made two contracts, one with the shipbuilders for the vessel and another with the engineers for her machinery, and one of the earliest firms to make marine engines was Fawcett Preston & Co., of this Town, who are still in existence.

When the Americans and Canadians commenced building their large and fast soft wood ships they were much cheaper than the British vessels, but they did not last so long; thus between the competition from the other side of the Atlantic and iron ships coming into use, the wooden shipbuilders gradually went out of business and only a few of the Liverpool yards were converted for the production of iron vessels.

It appears the Liverpool Dock Trust (which originally belonged to the Town, and was not a separate /

/Authority as now) would only grant an annual tenancy of the land for the yards to the shipbuilders, as with the rapid expansion of the shipping using the Port, more docks were needed, so the yards were gradually taken away. Consequently, about the middle of last century, a number of firms secured sites on the Birkenhead side of the Mersey and transferred their activities across the water.

GRAYSON'S. The family are said to have originally come from Whitehaven, and according to the late Mr. R. Stewart Brown, Edward Grayson was a Freeman of Liverpool in 1747, and three years later, when St. Thomas' Church, Park Lane, was consecrated, he was one of the first seatholders.

Edward Grayson is stated to have commenced business on his own account in 1858; in fact he was associated with John Okill in the building of H.M.S. VENUS, of 718 tons, completed that year.

At that time Liverpool only possessed two docks - the Old Dock (constructed in 1715 and filled up in 1826) and the South Dock (now known as Salthouse Dock). The latter was completed in 1753. These were the dividing line, as one portion of the beach was called the North Shore and the other the South Shore, and the shipbuilding yards were situated on the latter.

The Poll Book of 1761 describes Edward as a carpenter. (the equivalent of a shipbuilders in those days), living in Mersey Street, while the Directory of 1774 shows him as a shipwright, in Mersey Street, with a yard on the South Shore.

By 1781 the firm was Grayson and Ross, and continued as such for some six years. However, in 1785 the founder died and was succeeded by his son, Edward. From 1790 to 1796 the title of the firm was Grayson and Fearon, and it may be mentioned that according to the Liverpool Paper of November 17, 1791, they launched a beautiful packet called the MARQUIS OF KILDARE, for the Dublin trade. "She is a most complete model of a vessel, is upon a large scale, and we are informed unites every convenience with great elegance in her accommodations." Actually she was 135 tons register!

When the large ship WAIT, of 564 tons, was built in 1797, Edward appears to have been on his own account, and next year he was associated with Michael Humble in the construction of the very big ships CHARLTON and ASIA, each of 800 tons, for the East India Company.

Amongst other vessels Grayson launched was the TIGER, of 386 tons, in 1800, and next year the GENERAL ABERCROMBY, of 328 tons.

You will be sorry to learn this Edward Grayson met a tragic end at the early age of 45 years, in March 1804, when in a duel with Lieut. Sparling he received fatal injuries.

The business was then carried on by his executors, Messrs. Renshaw, who besides building other vessels, launched the ship FALMOUTH, of 434 tons, in 1806, and in the interval Charles Grayson, son of Edward, started as a shipwright, and a rather unusual launch was made by him on October 31, 1817, when the cutter LADY PATRONESS, of 40 tons, was drawn by 10 horses from his Norfolk Street yard and entered the water in the Queen's Dock at 11 o'clock at night!

From 1824-1827 the firm was Grayson and Leadley, while in 1825 a branch was established at Holyhead under the name of Grayson and Howson. In 1825 on the Mersey they launched the large paddle steamer COMMERCE, of 340 tons reg., and also the paddle steamer BOLIVAR for service abroad, and in the following year at Holyhead they placed in the water the paddle steamer CITY OF CARLISLE, of 300 tons, the first of the kind ever built in North Wales.

Charles Grayson died in 1836, aged 50 years, and for a time his sons, Charles and John Dorlin Grayson, carried on separate businesses, which they merged in 1841, and two years later the firm was Grayson and Bannister, but the latter died in 1844, aged 46, and in 1847 John Dorlin Grayson passed away at the early age of 40 years.

In 1850 we find Charles had gone into partnership with Michael Humble, under the name of Humble & Grayson. Humble's ancestor, another Michael, started the business in 1790 under the title of Smallshaw and Humble, as shipbuilders, but the latter was on his own in 1798 when he built the CHARLTON and ASIA for the East India Company, and as Humble & Hurry in 1804, at the west side of the King's Dock, they were the largest shipbuilders in Liverpool, employing 80 shipwrights and 14 apprentices. They constructed a large number of sailing craft, and apparently their first paddle steamer was the LUSITANO, built for owners in Portugal in 1822. Thereafter they produced a number of steamers for the coasting trades.

Seven years later Thomas Milcrest became a partner and the firm's title was Humble, Hurry & Milcrest. Michael Humble, senior, died in 1830, aged 79, and in 1837, as Humble & Milcrest, the firm built the largest paddle steamer constructed in Liverpool, named the LIVERPOOL, of 559 tons register, and 1,150 tons burthen. Her length was 212.9; /

/ breadth 28.5; depth in hold 19.3, with engines of 464hp. She was built for Sir John Tobin at a cost of £45,000 but he sold her to the Transatlantic Company and she ran between Liverpool and New York for a couple of years, when she was purchased by the Peninsular & Oriental Company.

By-the-way, in 1835 Michael Humble, jun., married Bridget Tobin, daughter of Thomas Tobin, so she was a niece of Sir John. William Hurry, who had retired from the firm some years previously, died in 1849 at the age of 77.

In 1853 Humble & Grayson obtained the contract for fitting out the ship SHOOTING STAR with gaslight.

Evidently in 1859 Humble retired and went to live in Denbighshire, when the firm became Charles & Henry Grayson; the latter was Henry Holdridge Grayson, son of John Dorlin.

Charles retired about 1870, but it was not until four years later that the title was altered to Henry & Charles Grayson, the latter being the son of Charles.

Many of the old steamers, when they became unsuitable for the trade in which they were employed, were converted into sailing vessels, and in 1881 Graysons secured the contract for removing the machinery and boilers from the celebrated iron screw steamer GREAT BRITAIN, of 3,400 tons, and rigging her as a "ship". She had been built in Bristol in 1843.

Grayson's eventually became a limited company under the title of H. & C. Grayson, Ltd., and about 1901 they formed the Garston Shipbuilding & Drydock Company at Garston, where they launched some 120 steel vessels, but shipbuilding there was given up in 1922.

Going back to 1907, in that year Grayson's further extended their operations by taking over the shiprepairing business of W.H. Potter & Company, also their works at Queen's Dock. Potter, who came from Hull, served his apprenticeship with Humble & Milcrest, and in 1850 started in business as a shipwright and was under the name of Mills & Potter in 1853, while two years later Potter was a partner in the firm of T.M. Mckay & Company, but in 1860 W.H. Potter & Company was the style of the concern at Baffin Street, and in 1863 they launched their first vessel, the BEDFORSHIPE, an iron ship of 1,200 tons. Altogether Potters built some 170 ships and steamers, including the 4-masted steel barque WANDLERER, of 2,700 tons, made famous by our sailor Poet Laureate, John Masefield. Their yard was given up in 1894, while Potter died in 1904 at the age of 77.

Grayson's next expansion took place in 1911 when the firm of Clover Clayton & Company, with their drydocks at Birkenhead, came under their control.

Matthew Clover commenced shipbuilding at Gower Street, Cornhill, in 1824, probably in association with his brother Robert, the firm being Matthew Clover and Co. In 1834 appears the name of John Clover, Berkeley Street, a master-mariner, described later as shipowner and finally as shipbuilder and shipowner, which suggests his interest in the business. Robert died in 1839, aged 56; and in 1845 John passed away at the age of 54, while Matthew died in the same year, aged 60. George Robert Clover, nephew of the latter and son of Robert then carried on the business until 1850, when Joseph Royle joined and the firm became Clover and Royle. After building several wooden vessels on the Liverpool side, they obtained a lease of land, in 1853, for a new yard at Birkenhead, and on retirement of Royle in 1857 the firm became George R. Glover and Co. In 1863, they completed their first iron ship, and in 1870 built the iron screw steamer "St. Louis" 1800 tons - the first to fly the Dominion Line flag. Three years later the adjoining yard and drydocks belonging to W. A. Clayton came into the business, which was now known as Clover Clayton & Co. The first trace of Clayton appears in 1843, when he was associated with Russell as Russell and Clayton, at Blundell Street, Liverpool. Unfortunately his partner Wilton Wood Russell (previously connected with Robert Russell and Sons of Birkenhead) died December 1842, aged 36. The firm then changed its name to W.A. Clayton and Co. and took a lease of land at Birkenhead where they constructed a drydock. For several years they traded as Clayton and M'Keverigan, and then as Blayton Bayley and Co., finally becoming the Woodside Graving Dock Co. In 1875 the new firm of Clover Clayton and Co. lost their shipbuilding yards owing to land being required by the railway company for a new station, but the drydocks were retained. In 1868 George Robert, junior, and Matthew Clover became partners, while their father retired in 1870 and died in 1881. Clayton ~~died~~ retired in 1879.

This was not the end of the Grayson extensions, as in 1918 David Rollo and Sons, engineers, of Sandhills, were taken over. David Rollo first appears in the directories as an engineer in 1862, and in 1865 was a partner in the firm of James Jack Rollo and Co, going into business on his own account in 1880 as David Rollo and Co., later to be David Rollo and Sons. These interests were merged in 1928 as Grayson, Rollo and Clover Drydocks Ltd., ship-repairers, and engineers, with yards at Sandhills, Wapping, Garston and Birkenhead. Today, Sir Henry Grayson, Bart. is chairman, while his son Denys, and grandson Ronald Grayson are Directors,

being the sixth, seventh and eighth generation of the family to be connected with the firm, which has now been in existence about 186 years.

Another notable local shipbuilding family is the Laird family. William Laird was a Liverpool merchant in 1810, and in 1824 started an ironfoundry at Birkenhead. It was his son John, however, who became the great shipbuilder. With a yard on the Wallasey Pool they launched their first iron vessel, a lighter on 30 tons and were soon building iron paddle steamers. Lairds are credited with having constructed the first iron vessels employed in Germany, India, China and U.S.A. Liverpool had built a number of naval ships during the latter half of the 18th century, the last being H.M.S. HAVANNAH in 1811, but it was Lairds who secured the first order thereafter, i.e. H.M.S. DOVER, 224 tons, in 1839, said to have been the first iron vessel built for H.M. services. When H.M.S. GUADELOUPE was launched in 1842, he was the fortysecond vessel launched from Lairds. Three years later they built H.M. Frigate BIRKENHEAD, 1400 tons. Her wreck off the Cape of Good Hope in 1852 stands out in British history as an epic story of courage and discipline. In 1852, Lairds took over Vernon's yard at the Dingle, Liverpool, and thus were launching vessels on both sides of the river. In the following year they leased land for a new yard at Woodside, and in 1853 took over Thomas Wilson's yard at Birkenhead. Three years later they gave up their site at Wallasey Pool, transferred their activities to both banks of the Mersey and about that period commenced constructing machinery for their steamers. John Laird was a strong advocate of docks on both sides of the Merse being under one control, which resulted in formation of the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board in 1853. Three years later he became Birkenhead's first M.P. and handed over the business to his sons, the firm becoming William and John Laird, when they built a wooden screw vessel of about 1,000 tons (Yard No. 290) engined by Fawcett Preston and Co. She became notorious as the Confederate armed raider ALABAMA, which cost Britain some millions of pounds compensation. By 1864 the firm had become Laird Brothers, and in the following year they completed the ironclad H.M.S. AGINCOURT, 3680 tons, 1350 horse-power. The firm of Cammels was founded in 1837, and in 1903 amalgamated with Lairds and at the same time took over the Tranmere Bay Development Co. which was founded by

John Jones, a Liverpool, engineer and boiler maker, in 1855. The firm became John Jones and Son and about 1880 commenced building ships at the Brunswick Dock, and in 1899 moved over to Tranmere, taking the name of the Tranmere Bay Development Co. They built some 300 vessels,. They were the last shipbuilders to have a yard on the Liverpool side of the Mersey.

Lairds, during their long career, have completed over 1,000 vessels for Royal Navy and merchant navy, thus establishing a great reputation.

One of the most respected Liverpool family names is that of Royden. The first Thomas Royden commenced apprenticeship with Charles Grayson in 1808, completed the last two years of same with Melling and Watson. He then opened a yard at Baffin Street, trading as Royden and Ward, shipwrights. Five years later they built their first vessel, a wooden schooner RYDLAND CASTLE, 83 tons. In 1824 James Ward retired, and Royden continued the business. With so much timber, tar, Pitch etc. lying about, shipyard fires were not uncommon on those days, and in 1825 a fire started in Roydens yard, destroying a nearly-completed vessel and one other in frame. It then spread to John Wilson's adjoining yard, and to Clarke and Nickson's, eventually reaching Dawson and Pearson's premises, in each of which various ships were being constructed and the damage thus proved extensive. From 1828 to 1835 the firm was styled Thomas Royden and Co. John Watson then became a partner. Then it again became Thomas Royden and eventually the founder's sons, Thomas Bland Royden and Joseph Royden joined the firm, which became Thomas Royden and Sons. Up to 1862, wooden vessels were built, the largest being the ANNE ROYDEN, 1175 tons. In 1863 iron was used and four years later they launched the National liner FRANCE, 3572 tons. Thomas Royden died 1868, at 76 years of age. In 1881 they built the steamer ARISTIDES, 1563 tons, their first steel ship, and continued in the business until 1893 when they completed their 263rd vessel, the barque PRINCE ROBERT, and the yard was given up. Their building rate had averaged four vessel a year. Thomas Bland Royden was Mayor of Liverpool in 1878-9 and in 1905 a baronetcy was conferred upon him. He died 1917, at the advanced age of 86 years.

John Wilson commenced shipbuilding at Cornhill Liverpool in 1807, and four years later built the frigate HAVANNAH, 949 tons, which gave him the name of "Frigate John". His sons William and Thomas became partners. John died 1835 at 64 years of age. The Wilson firm built sailing ships and many of the early steamers, and in 1836

they launched the wooden paddle steamer ROYAL WILLIAM for the Dublin Company, 403 tons with engines of 276 h.p. from Fawcett, Preston and Co. She made history in 1838, while under charter by the Transatlantic Co., sailing from the Mersey on 5th July - the first steamer to cross from Liverpool to New York - making the passage in 19 days. This was two years before the Cunarder BRITANNIA made her maiden voyage. In 1840 Wilsons launched the paddle steamer UNITED STATES, 1400 tons, for the American trade, but she was purchased by the P. & O. Line and re-named ORIENTAL. Two years later Thomas Wilson (whose brother William had just died) built the wooden paddler HINDOSTAN, 2000 tons, and in 1843 the BENTINCK a similar vessel, Both for the P. & O. His yard was then at the North Shore, but in 1850 he transferred his operations to Birkenhead, where he built some iron vessels. In 1853, however, Wilson gave up business and died in 1885, aged 79.

Thomas Vernon started as a boiler maker in 1829 at St. Anne Street, and in 1841 the firm became Thomas Vernon and Co. iron shipbuilders etc. on the North Shore where, in 1843, they launched the paddle steamer NIMROD, 700 tons, for the Irish trade, being the 30th iron vessel they had constructed. The firm also had a yard at Dingle which they transferred to Lairds in 1852, but continued building at Brunswick Dock. Thomas Vernon died in 1861 aged 63, and his son John carried on, opening a yard four years later at Seacombe, but ten years later they were out of the business.

Robert and John Evans, still in existence as ship-repairers etc., were once well-known shipbuilders, founded about 1840, first as shipwrights and then as boatbuilders etc. Their first vessel was launched about 1857, and within a year or two they were turning out iron ships. They have to their credit some of the finest sailers which ever left the Mersey, in addition to steamers. The 132nd and last craft to be launched was the 4-mast barque LYNTON, 2351 tons, in 1895.

The Liverpool Shipbuilding Co's career started in 1841 by Henry Jordan as a shipwright. Six years later they became Tucker and Jordan with a yard at Baffin Street, and about 1849 Jordan and Finlay. In 1850 they built the schooner EXCELSIOR, a composite vessel of iron and wood, under a system known as Jordan's patent. Other and larger vessels of this construction followed. Jordan and Getty was their title in 1853, and two years later they became Jones Getty and Co., while from 1857 Josiah Jones Junior continued the business

About the same time William Quiggin, who served his time under Vernon and had been manager for Cram, the Chester ship-builder, became manager and draughtsman for Jones; and in 1860 the firm became Jones Quiggin and Co. They are said to have been the first to build steel vessels here, i.e. the DONITILIA, 266 tons, in 1863, and they launched numerous swift steel paddle steamers for blockade-running purposes in the early 'sixties. With a capital of £300,000 they formed the Liverpool Shipbuilding Co. in 1865, in February of that year launching no less than 5 steamers on one tide.

In 1871 their largest vessel was built, the National liner EGYPT, 4769 tons, but about 1875 they discontinued building, finally going out of business about 1880.

William Quiggin died at Blundellsands in 1892, aged 71.

Altogether, the firm had built over 150 ships and steamers.

Mottershead and Hayes, who built the first steamer at Liverpool, should be mentioned. They started at the New Quay in 1803 as Mottershead and Hutchinson, but ten years later Edward Hutchinson died, aged 55, and Mottershead then took in Christopher Hayes as partner, the firm becoming Mottershead and Hayes, with a yard on the South Shore. In July 1816 they completed the wooden paddler PRINCESS CHARLOTTE for the Liverpool-Eastham ferry service. Full details of this vessel are not available but contemporary newspapers stated that she had a flush deck apart from her paddles and boiler, with a very tall thin funnel, as tall as her single mast. The firm built numerous other ferry craft and larger paddle steamers for the coastal trade, in addition to sailing craft. In 1827, Hayes' son Christopher joined the firm, then styled Mottershead, Hayes and Son, and in 1834 John Mottershead senior died, aged 69. In the following year Hayes retired, and John Mottershead, son of the founder, carried on on his own account until 1843, when he retired.

There have been more than 100 firms, large and small, building ships on the Lancashire and Cheshire sides of the Mersey at one time or another, but today only one remains, i.e. Cammel Laird & Co., at Birkenhead.