

## The Town Quay (Southampton) – 2 – The Motor Barges

By W. H. Mitchell

*Transcribed, with permission, from the Southampton Branch of the Worlds Ships Society journal BlackJack, Autumn 1987 - <http://www.sotonwss.org.uk/blackjack/BlackJackNr64.pdf>*

*[2022 This transcription has been produced as the 1987 articles included some history of cross-Solent trade by Motor Barges which people may find of interest. A very few additions have been made within square brackets [...].*

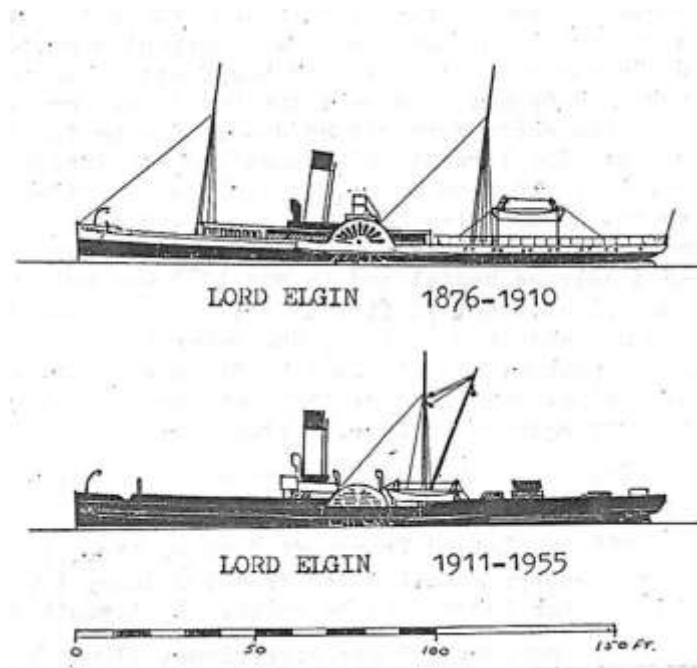
There were several companies owning motor barges which were competitive in the motor-barge trade to and from the Isle of Wight between the two wars. The main ports involved were Southampton, Portsmouth and Cowes and Newport on the River Medina.

Newport, the commercial capital of the Island is about 4 ½ miles inland and its harbour, in a semi-pastoral setting at the head of the River Medina is dominated by tides.

Through the harbour of Cowes, past the chain ferry are J. Samuel White's yards, yacht yards and gasworks and from there onwards is the Wight countryside. Then, to starboard, opposite The Folly Inn, are the remains of the old Werrar brickworks. There, bricks were handmade and shipped in barges, Williams' barges in particular, to Exbury Creek, then by horse-drawn cart to Exbury village where they were used in the building of the watertower, the hostel, shop and houses.

About halfway up the river, to port, is Binfield Mill Pond where the paddle steamer 'Medway Queen' arrived in September 1965 until taken away on a pontoon in April 1984 to her original home in the River Medway. The paddler 'Kingswear Castle' also lay there for a time in the late 1960's and in later years yet another paddler, Ryde Queen, originally the Portsmouth-Ryde ferry 'Ryde', was moved there as a night club. And just before Newport, on the starboard side are the remains of the old Blue Circle cement works. Onwards, and suddenly there are the quays of Newport and their red-bricked warehouses, with St Thomas' church tower peering over the roofs. Here is where for so many years the sailing barges, the fore-and-aft sail 'boomies', the 'spritties' and later, the motor barges discharged their cargoes of foodstuffs, furniture and farming equipment; woods, wines and other wares. But reluctantly, the sailing ships gave way to the motor barge, some being so converted, then they, too, succumbed to the container and its juggernaut carrier.

Some motor barges stopped at Cowes and so did the Southampton, Isle of Wight and South of England RMSP Co's 'Lord Elgin', which paddled to and from Berth 7 at Southampton's Town Quay for over forty years.



She was built in 1876 at Stockton on Tees as a 'fast-and magnificent - saloon steamship', but was converted to cargo-only in 1910. For many years she sailed five days a week in each direction and when the motor car boom came, made special car-carrying voyages in each direction on Saturdays in summer. The 'Lord Elgin' arrived at Pollock Brown's yard at Northam under her own power on 13 May 1955 for breaking up.

Her place was taken by a converted-LCT, 'Norris Castle', but there was a difference; the loading and discharge of vehicle was now undertaken at the Royal Pier pontoons.

Pickford & Company were early traders to the Isle of Wight. As long ago as 1862 a notice informed of a relocation of their Portsmouth premises where sailing barges and steamers would run to Cowes and to Ryde, ground on Ryde sands and off-loading cargo to high-wheeled horse-drawn carts for distribution in the area. Pickfords also claimed the first motor-barge when the 'Wasp' was constructed in 1906 at Amsterdam, 52 ft 9 inch in length, 12 ft 4 inches in breadth, giving 25 gross tons. Engines gave 24 bhp.

Two more Amsterdam-built motor barges, 'Bat' and 'Krom' were still owned by Pickfords at the beginning of war in 1939. Built 1912-13, these were 83 ft x 16 ft, 74 gt, with a 90 bhp engine. Also in the fleet at that time was the 'Mount', built in 1938 by Humphery & Grey Lighterage Ltd., London, 76 ft long, 19 ft wide and 118 gt.

A Newport company was Shepard Brothers, whose history dates back to the early 1800's. They used Newport Quay and also Medina Commercial Wharf, later known as Shepards Wharf at Cowes. They also worked from Southampton's Town Quay.

Crouchers Ltd., was another Newport concern with offices in Quay Street. They worked from Newport Quay, or Cowes Town Quay if the tide was unsuitable, to Southampton and

to the Camber Quay, Portsmouth and by the 1930's had built up a sizeable fleet of motor barges. All had 'hunting' related names.

	gt	ft	hp			gt	ft	hp	
Brush	49	70	44	ex wood sailing vessel FW 18	Tally Ho (wood)	44	62	60	Blt Stonehouse 1912
Fox	26	52	35	Blt Plymouth 1898. wood	Tantivy (steel)	84	77	80	Blt Kings Lynn 1926
Harkaway	27	53	35	Blt Plymouth 1903. wood	Whip (wood)	64	73	50	Blt Newport loW 1922
Huntsman	23	53	35	Blt Plymouth 1903. wood	Vixen	21	Wooden sloop, blt at Plymouth, 1900		
M F H (steel)	78	71	100	Blt Thorne 1930 ex Gainsborough Trader	Chamois	27	Wooden ketch, blt Stonehouse, Plymouth, 1917		
Mask (steel)	60	67	80	Blt Portsmouth 1926. ex Southsea Castle	Hunt	62	Blt Brimscombe 1924		

Apart from routine services, grain and some other bulk commodities were carried. The 'Mask' was sold by Brickwoods to Crouchers with a contract for them to carry Brickwoods beers from Portsmouth.

Another Wight carrier was Island Transport Co. Ltd., which began trading in 1922. It was a subsidiary of the East Cowes shipbuilders, J. Samuel White & Company and the barges which ran to Portsmouth and Southampton carried steelwork and other equipment for the parent company. However, the Portsmouth run was discontinued after war ended and in 1965 the White Yard closed down, leaving the Southampton service trading with general cargo. The largest ship owned was the 'Arreton', 103 ft (loa) x 20 ft, giving 121 gt. Built by W. Dobson & Co., Newcastle as an 'X'-type landing craft in 1916, she was shipped to the Dardanelles campaign and towed back to Southampton, there to be converted to a motor barge at Cowes. In 1958 she was rebuilt and re-engined. Later, the 'Arreton' worked as a salvage vessel and in May 1983 was sold by order of her owner's liquidator. The 'Brighstone' 75 ft x 17 ft, 84 gt was built in 1914 at Amsterdam as Eliza Holt and was acquired in 1923. She later became a barge. Another Amsterdam-built ship was 'Debourne', 105 ft (loa) 99 ft bp x 17 ft, 104 gt, built by Verschure & Co and named 'Amsterdam'. She was registered at Cowes in 1937. In the 1960's she was working for Parkway Aggregates Ltd., Portsmouth.

The 'Calbourne' and 'Shalfleet' were sisterships, both 103 gt, 96 ft x 19 ft and built by J. Samuel White, Cowes.

In 1968 the Island Transport Company Ltd., became part of the Red Funnel Group, along with Vectis Shipping Co. Ltd and from 1 January 1976 were integrated into Vectis Transport Ltd. for a motor barge service between Portsmouth and Newport. Three barges were employed:

'Murius', 125 gt; 'Riverciose', 110 gt. and 'Newclose', 118 gt. all built by Dunston at Thorne in 1962, 1957 and 1960 respectively.

But not for long; the service closing down as the last Solent barge left Flathouse Quay, Portsmouth on Friday 30 October 1981 on her last round voyage.

In 1936 Pickfords acquired the business and ships of the three companies, Crouchers, Chaplins and Shepards combining to a fleet of twenty-one ships ranging from 22 tons to three of 51 tons, and two dumb timber barges. The ships continued the services, although more now discharged and loaded at Cowes, timesaving the navigation of the Medina.

Another factor slowly came in the late 1930's - the container. The largest barges could carry two underdeck and two on deck, but this was restricted in bad weather for there was an occasion when one had to be jettisoned to prevent the ship from foundering.

Pickfords then ordered a ship to meet these factors and in 1938 the 'Mount' was delivered from the East Greenwich yard of Humphery & Grey Lighterage Ltd. Of 76 ft length and 19 ft breadth, her gross tonnage was 118 and she was capable of carrying six containers, two on deck and four underdeck.

Then came war and Dunkirk, and five of the fleet were sent to assist: 'Bee', 'Bat', 'Chamois', 'Hound' and 'M.F.H.' The 'Bee' and the 'Bat' brought back several hundreds of servicemen. So did 'M.F.H.' which picked men up from the beach and ferried them to the bigger ships laying off. The 'M.F.H.' herself, then brought back 140 troops to England. The 'Chamois' was twice beaten back by air attacks and on the third attempt got to two miles from Dunkirk, rescuing 120 from two ships being bombed. Motor barges also assisted in transporting the long sections of PLUTO pipeline and later helped in bringing them back for salvage.

When war ended, most companies looked to fleet rebuilding. Pickfords needed new ships for the growing container trade and the containers themselves were also being made larger - from 550 to 750 cu.ft.

But in 1948 under the Transport Act, the British Transport Commission became the new owners. Three ships were then ordered, each capable of carrying ten containers. All were built by J. Bolson & Son Ltd., Poole. They were twin screw vessels, 81 ft x 19 ft and 133 gross tons. The 'Field' was completed in 1949, 'Crop' and 'Covert' in 1950.

The twin screw 'Mount' of 1938 also joined the fleet and the service was daily between Point Wharf and Cowes, some making double trips in the summer months. Another change came in 1956 with part de-nationalisation and the operating title, formerly the Road Haulage Executive name became British Road Services Ltd.

Two more ships were launched in 1960, 'Needles' and 'Cowes' and then, in 1962, the last ship for the service, 'Northwood', 100 ft x 23 ft, 171 gt and driven by twin screws was completed by R. Dunston Ltd., Hessle.

But the age of the container ship which had begun in 1955 was now getting into full swing. New ferries, capable of carrying vehicles and their containers were being constructed. By 1970 only four ships were in service, then this became two – ‘Northwood’ and ‘Needles’ - and in December 1975 the ‘Northwood’ became the last of the motor barges on the Cowes-Portsmouth service.

Chaplins was another company engaged in the Wight trade. Pre-1898 they operated four sailing ships, but in that year a steamship was built at Blackwall for the trade. Steel-hulled, the ‘Excelsior’ was 78 ft long and 16 ft wide; gross tonnage was 66 and horsepower 18. She later joined the Vectis Transport Co. Ltd., Portsmouth. Of shallow draught for unloading at Ryde, her hatchway was long enough for two furniture vanslifted by the ship’s gear.

Some of these Vectis craft are recorded for interest. One of the best remembered perhaps, is the ‘Moultonian’, built at Harvey Shipbuilding Company’s, Littlehampton yard in 1919. She had black topsides and white quarter-boards, with scrollwork name and streak in yellow. She began her career as a ketch and was motorised in 1926. Details were, 100 ft long and 23 ft beam, and 164 gross tons. Almost a sistership was ‘Wessex’, 148 gt, completed by Harveys in 1918.

There was also the wooden-hulled ‘Murius’, 106 gt, built at Lowestoft in 1888, later acquired and motorised in 1939. She too was at Dunkirk and took French troops to Ramsgate. She was also used to take army stores to the Spithead and Island forts and was broken up at Bruges, Belgium in May 1961. Another Vectis Shipping Company vessel was ‘The Match’, Deptford-built in 1914.

Other Portsmouth companies were Curtis and Son Ltd., who owned the 40-ton ‘Vectensian’, built of wood at Portsmouth in 1927. Also listed under an earlier Vectis Transport Company (whose address was at Quay House, Broad Street, Portsmouth) were the ‘Wasp’, 53 ft long, 25 gt, built at Amsterdam in 1906 and driven by a 24 hp oil engine; the ketch ‘Nyassa’, 36 tons, built at Emsworth in 1904 as the ‘Juno’; the 24-ton, 23 hp ‘London’, also built at Emsworth in 1899 with a conversion to motor in 1927 and the ‘Eivis’, 109 ft x 22 ft, 130 gt and a 38 bhp engine. She was built of concrete [by the Whitehall Dockyard Company] at Whitby in 1919 as the ‘R.A.F. 110’ and was registered at Portsmouth in 1937.

### **A Wight export**

Exports from the Isle of Wight included fine old beer, brewed by W. B. Mew, Langton & Co. Ltd., of Crocker Street, Newport. At the start a sailing barge was chartered, but in 1921 the company had a motor barge, ‘Wight’, built at East Coves and she worked until about 1952, overlapping her successor by about four years. This was ‘XXXX’, built by J. Samuel White & Company in 1948, 56 gt, 65 ft long and driven by a diesel engine which gave 84 bhp. Her load was about 140 tons of barrelled beer (about 90 tons actual beer) which she loaded twice weekly for discharging at Southampton’s Town Quay, Lymington and Portsmouth.

But in 1965 Strong & Co. of Ramsey merged with Mew, Langton and most of the Mew, Langton inns on the mainland were soon selling Strongs beer. In April 1966, her name 'XXXX', taken from Mew, Langton's prize-winning brown ale and with 'MEW'S ALES' painted boldly on her hull, made her last export voyage from Newport and the 'beer-run' closed down, transportation from then on by lorry and Red Funnel ferry.

### **Blue Funnel**

In the past few years [from 1987] the Blue Funnel Cruises (Wm. Hogg) ships have also berthed on the eastern side of the Town Quay, beginning this practice as the Royal Pier closed. These small vessels became extremely popular over the years, 'Verda', 'Solent Queen', 'Princessa' and 'Venus' all becoming familiar names and were superseded by the 'Solent Scene' (1984) and 'Leisure Scene' (1985). These two ships have recently been moved to new berth at the Ocean Village.

### **Williams Shipping**

Williams Shipping Co. (Fawley) Ltd., has origins in the early 1920's, one of the earliest vessels, the 15-ton ketch 'Exchange', built at Emsworth in 1902, being owned and trading in pre-war days by James Williams & Son, of Mount Cottage, Fawley.

In 1923 the 'Wilbernia' was built at Portsmouth, her wooden hull 56 ft x 13 ½ ft giving 29 tons and her oil engine developing 60 hp. She was registered at Portsmouth in her year of build under James Williams & Son although the address was then Fernlea, Ashdown, Fawley. There was also a motor barge 'J.J.C.' of 36 tons, built at Amsterdam in 1910. The barge 'Medina' also came into William's ownership, but she unfortunately ran on a wooden pile. The pile was sawn and the ship dragged into Ashlett Creek; there she remained.

Another barge purchased was the 'Tim', just after war ended. Formerly a government ammunition barge until 1945, she had been sunk off Dockhead, Southampton and was first acquired by Philip Underwood who had her converted to motor drive. After service with Williams she was sold to P. Russeil in 1960 (c) who altered her to a floating chandlery and moved her to Bucklers Hard. She is still [1987] afloat at Bursledon as a houseboat.

Under the title Williams Shipping Co (Fawley) Ltd., the firm expanded, serving two roles. Operating from the Town Quay they had a share in the Wight trade but the major work was in ferrying supplies, food and in crew changes to the tankers at Fawley and to ships anchored in Southampton Water, Cowes Roads etc. At that time they were unique in being able to load the supplies direct from the holds of their barges with derricks.

The company also had a subsidiary, Southern Tanker & Bunkering Co. Ltd., six coastal ships being based on the Town Quay. Formed in 1968, it ended in 1975.

As stated in the beginning of this article<sup>1</sup>, their move from Berth 69 Town Quay to Berth 24 Empress Dock, Eastern Docks in early 1987 now [1987] leaves the Town Quay for its new life in the leisure industry. The Williams fleet now consists of the motor barges 'Murius', 'Wilbernia' and 'Wilbonnie'; two fast passenger launches, a towage launch and a number of lighters.

Williams barges still [1987] transport grain from the Isle of Wight to Ranks Mills at Southampton and abnormal loads are also transported in either direction.

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<sup>1</sup> See The Town Quay (Black Jack No 63 Summer 1987).

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An advertisement of the 1930s.

The story of the Town Quay and its Shipping has been put together from many sources; books, magazines, news items and recollections of shipping men so connected, in particular Ray Williams of Williams Shipping Co (Fawley) Ltd. It endeavours to give a picture of the Town Quay, its trades and the types of ships employed in those trades but it is acknowledged as being far from complete, especially in the movements in the ownership of craft and any further information will be welcome in helping to build up further history of the ships and their trades.



Additional pictures:



M.V. "NORRIS CASTLE"

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Newport Quay, looking North – Alexander Sharp's timber warehouse on right



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Newport Town Quay

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