

SOUTHAMPTON DOCKS: A 150th ANNIVERSARY

While the port of Southampton was established by Roman times, dock construction is a comparatively recent development. Enclosed docks were constructed in the early eighteenth century in a number of ports, including London and Liverpool. Arguably, the most distinctive feature of the Southampton docks was their association with the newly-opened railway to London and with passenger steamers. Their history begins shortly after the development of the steam vessel and the steam railway, and parallels their development. If the original proposal had materialized, railway and dock would have been constructed by the same company, thus anticipating an amalgamation which was postponed until 1892. However, various difficulties caused the company to concentrate on its railway, and a separate undertaking was formed to construct the docks.

The Southampton Dock Company obtained their authorising Act of Parliament in 1836, and held their first general meeting in London in the August of that year (*PRO Southampton Dock Co Minute Book* vol 1). The shareholders were described as merchants and shipowners of London, Liverpool and Manchester, together with a few merchants from Salisbury and Southampton. The town of Southampton had almost no place in the dock company, which was London based and held its meetings in London. At the early meetings, attention was concentrated on the plans to open the first dock by 1838. Its site, on the mudlands to the south-east of the town, was described as 'One of the most eligible situations for commercial docks in the Kingdom'. There were good foundations for the quay walls, the dock could be reached by a short extension of the railway and it was well placed for future extensions. Because of the moderate tidal range, coupled with double tides, it was possible to dispense with an entrance lock with gates, which would normally have been necessary to maintain the water level in the dock. This not only saved construction costs, but also permitted a wider entrance with ingress and egress for vessels at

all times. The area of enclosed water was to be about 14 acres with 1500 ft of quays and a depth at low water of between 18 and 19 ft. It was claimed that it would be larger than any other enclosed dock, including those under construction in Liverpool.

Some 216 acres of mudland were purchased from Southampton Corporation for £5000 and this was expected to allow for all future extensions. Other necessary purchases were the Royal Gloucester Baths for £4896 and the oyster beds for £100. Materials came from a number of places. Stone was carried from Osborne in the Isle of Wight, where the company had bought a quarry, and also from Portland and Swanage. Soil, for filling, came from Woolston and the bricks for the warehouses, which were modelled on those built in the West India Docks in London, came from local brickyards.

Mainly because of the difficulty in extracting money from the shareholders, the start of constructional works was delayed, and it was not until 12 October 1838, that the foundation stone was laid. (This is the date celebrated in 1988.) Lack of a dock did not prevent the officers seeking customers and, despite the predominance of sailing ships, they concentrated on steamship lines. The Royal Mail Steam Packet Co obtained their Royal Charter in 1839, and agreement was reached for their vessels to use the still unfinished dock. In the event, the first two steamers to enter the dock belonged to the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Co – the P & O line. The *Liverpool* and the *Tagus* were the first vessels to use the North Quay, on 2 September 1842. At this time, the constructional work was unfinished and the official opening was delayed until 1 July 1843.

The opening of the new dock made a considerable impact on the town. During the construction period from 1838 until 1843, although the number of navvies engaged varied, it was usually in the hundreds. The Queen's College, Oxford, combined with the French congregation to make the chapel at



Fig 2. No 2 Dry Dock opened on the south side of the Outer Dock in 1847. (Commercial postcard, c 1900)

God's House available for the navvies. (It was felt necessary for them to have their own church so that they did not attempt to justify non-attendance by the lack of 'clothes suitable to mix with another congregation'.)

The importance of the link with the railway has already been mentioned and, indeed, Southampton was the first railway-linked port

for passengers in the country. Passenger handling provided less work for dock labour, but steamship repairs increased the demand for engineers in the ship repair establishments associated with the dry docks (Fig 2). 1838 marks the beginning of the greatest period in the history of the port of Southampton; it is a date worth remembering.

REFERENCE

Public Record Office *Southampton Dock Co Minute Book of General Meetings* Vol 1, 1836-1847, RAIL 870/1.

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