NATIONAL MUSEUMS LIVERPOOL

MARITIME ARCHIVES & LIBRARY

INFORMATION SHEET 26

SHIPBUILDING ON MERSEYSIDE

Ships and boats were undoubtedly built on the shores of the Mersey from the earliest times of settlement but little survives, either as documentary or archaeological evidence, apart from the discovery of a number of log boats on the upper Mersey.

From the late 17th century onwards, a major shipbuilding industry developed around Liverpool itself, mainly to provide vessels for local owners who were expanding their trading connections, especially those across the Atlantic. This can be seen on S. & N. Buck's, *View of Liverpool*, of 1728, on display in the Merseyside Maritime Museum. This shows the first dock in Liverpool and wooden ships can be seen under construction on the banks of the Mersey.

The history of Liverpool's 18th century shipbuilders is covered in Stewart Brown's *Liverpool Ships in the 18th Century* (Liverpool, 1932). This provides a detailed account of the numbers of vessels produced, as well as biographies of individual shipbuilders. It also covers the early 19th century, ending with the great shipbuilding enquiry of 1850.

In the early 19th century, the prosperity of local shipbuilders came under threat from a number of directions. First, there was increased competition from other shipbuilders, notably those in the north east of England and in British North America, where timber was cheaper. There was also industrial unrest amongst the shipwrights in Liverpool and difficulties with establishing secure tenancies on the waterfront.

The latter problem arose because of the need to expand the dock system to cope with the port's increasing traffic. For example, major shipbuilders had occupied the site of the Albert Dock, which fronted the 18th century Salthouse Dock since the rise of the port. But with the onset of the Albert Dock project, they were obliged to move to other sites further downstream, and this remained a continuing problem. Indeed, the end of shipbuilding on the north bank of the river came about in 1899 with the need to rebuild the south docks from Queens Dock to Herculaneum. Some builders moved to the south bank of the Cheshire shore and the most successful of these was William Laird who, starting with a small boiler works at Wallasey Pool in 1828, was the first to develop iron shipbuilding on the Mersey.

One of the last relics of Liverpool's wooden shipbuilding era is the merchant ship *Jhelum*, a wooden three-masted ship of 427 tons, whose hulk still lies at Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands. This vessel has been surveyed in detail by the Merseyside Maritime Museum and the results have been published in M.K. Stammers and J. Kearon's, *The Jhelum - a Victorian Merchant Ship* (National Museums Liverpool, 1992).

From the mid-1850s, Liverpool builders followed Laird's example and converted rapidly to iron shipbuilding. Firms such as R. & J. Evans and Roydens continued building fine iron sailing ships up until the 1890s. It is possible to trace the details of individual ships built in Liverpool at this period, either through Lloyd's Registers, which have a particularly useful appendix from 1876, for the production of individual shipbuilders, or through the Liverpool Registers of Merchant Ships (C/EX/L/1-9).

However, the business records of individual firms (with one exception) are very few. This is due to the fact that most of them went out of business at the end of the 19th century. The initial notes of A.C. Wardle, who planned a seven volume history of British shipbuilding, are held in the archives of the Liverpool Nautical Research Society (D/LNRS) and preserved in the Maritime Archives & Library. The Maritime Archives & Library also holds an auction sale catalogue for equipment of Lawrence & Co. (MDHB Legal H44), the specification of the Liverpool Shipbuilding Co. of 1855-1856 (formerly Jones, Quiggin & Co.) and a small quantity of items from R. & J. Evans. There are printed company histories of Graysons, Roydens and the Liverpool shipbuilding firm of Potters in John Masefield's *The Wanderer* (Macmillan, 1930), which is an account of their most famous vessel. Levels of production are covered by Frank Neal's paper, published in *Research in Progress*, Vol. 4. Local newspapers held at Liverpool City Record Office also carry reports of launching ceremonies.

Graysons continued to build at Garston in the south end of Liverpool until 1921. By 1900, although there was still extensive ship repairing capacity on Merseyside, the only yard to build ships of significance, was Lairds. The firm merged with Charles Cammell of Sheffield in 1903 to become Cammell Laird. The bulk of its archives are held by the Wirral Museum and Archive Service, Birkenhead. One local company, however, McTay Marine of Bromborough, Wirral, is still building vessels of up to 500 tons.

There were also a number of firms involved in marine engine building. Fawcett Preston are perhaps the most distinguished such company (though by no means confined to marine work) whose archives we are fortunate to hold (B/FP - collection held in reserve storage - available only by prior appointment). The Maritime Archives & Library has also been able to collect records from a wide range of other trades, despite the widespread loss of such records, eg sailmakers, hatch manufacturers, nautical telegraph and instrument makers, ropemakers, ships' brass founders and cleaners, as well as a number of ship repairers.

Archival Sources

Mersey Docks and Harbour Board (MDHB) Estate Records

These records bear upon the Mersey shipbuilding industry considerably. Not only did the MDHB own vessels (the contracts for which are preserved), but it also purchased shipyards and relocated them, a policy which led to the total decline of shipbuilding on the Liverpool side of the river (held at North Street Store - available only by prior appointment).

Cheshire Contracts

A/1/3	T. Vernon & Son, Woodside Landing Stage, 1860.
A/1/5	T. Brassey & Co., Westminster & Canada Works, Birkenhead, 1871.
A/1/20	Bowdler & Chaffer, Seacombe, Wirral, 1875 (paddle steam vessel).
A/1/24	Bowdler & Chaffer, Seacombe, Wirral, 1875 (dredging machine).

Lancashire Contracts

K/1/28	R. & J. Evans, Liverpool, steam screw tug *Hodgson*, 1882 (with plan).
K/1/39	W.H. Potter, Liverpool, steam watch vessel, 1884.
K/1/42	R. & J. Evans, Liverpool, iron lightship, 1885.
K/1/44	Brundrit & Co., Runcorn, wooden lightship, 1886 (with plan).

Cheshire Leases to Shipbuilding Firms

P/1/5/1-2	John Laird, Birkenhead, 1853-1857.
P/1/9/1	John Laird, Birkenhead, 1861.
P/1/49/1-33	Cammell Laird & Tranmere Bay Development Co., 1900-1954 (with plans).

Lancashire Leases to Liverpool Shipbuilding Firms

P/2/1/2	Peter Cato, 1844.
P/2/1/4	William Rennie, 1849 / T. Vernon & Sons, 1855.
P/2/1/5	James Brooke, 1851.
P/2/1/6	Thomas Brandreth, 1854.
P/2/1/25-26	W.H. Potter, 1869.
P/2/1/30	Charles Grayson, shipwright, 1870.

Research Sources
(available at the Maritime Archives & Library)

A.C. Wardle's Research Files, D/LNRS/1/1-15 and D/LNRS/3/1-8.
Captain Beard's Collection, D/LNRS/4/2/1-19 (sailing ship histories)
Cochrane Collection (steamship histories)
The Cammell Laird Magazine, 1957-1965.
Liverpool Register of Shipping, 1835.
Liverpool National Register of Shipping, 1845.
Lloyd's Register, 1764 to date.
Marwood's Shipping Register, 1854.
Shipbuilding and Shipping Record, 1915, 1919-1922, 1933, 1936-1938, 1940-1964. 1968-1973.
The *Shipbuilder*, 1911-1912.

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BURSTALL, A.R. *Shipbuilding in Liverpool, Sea Breezes*, Vol. XX. April-May 1936.

BURTON, A. *The Rise and Fall of British Shipbuilding*. London, 1994.

RITCHIE, L.A. *The Shipbuilding Industry - A Guide to Historical Records*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992.

VILLE, S. (ed.) *Shipbuilding in the United Kingdom in the 19th Century: A Regional Approach, Research in Maritime History*, No. 4. IMEHA/National Museums Liverpool, 1993.