

MARITIME ARCHIVES AND LIBRARY

INFORMATION SHEET 69

T & J HARRISON LTD

Thomas Harrison (1815-1888) was apprenticed to the firm of Samuel Brown & Son & Co., Shipbrokers of Liverpool in 1830. James Harrison (1821-1891) joined Samuel Brown in 1838, and in 1839 Thomas became a partner in the firm. In 1849 James became a full partner and by this time the firm's main activity was the importation into Liverpool of brandy and wine from the town of Cognac and the valley of the River Charente, France.

Upon George Brown's death in 1853, the Harrisons took over the business under the name of Thos. & Jas. Harrison. In 1857 they bought their first iron hulled sailing ship, the *Philosopher* and the firm began the tradition of naming their ships after trades and professions. In 1862 they successfully started sending sailing ships to India, the Far East and to Central and South America, with regular sailings being advertised in 1863.

In February 1863 Harrisons withdrew from the London brandy service and steamers were sent for wines from Spain and Portugal. Brandy was also exported out of Liverpool for Demerara. In 1864 the *Gladiator* inaugurated services to Brazil and the "brandy boats" extended into the Mediterranean fruit trade. This was followed by steamer services to New Orleans, begun by *Fire Queen* in July 1866 in the cotton trade. The *Fire Queen* was also the first Harrison ship to sail to India via the newly opened Suez Canal in 1870, and commenced regular sailings on this route. In 1875 Harrisons were founder members in the Calcutta Conference, an attempt to control tonnage in this trade.

In 1871 the Charente Steamship Company was established to take on the ownership of the ships with Thos. & Jas. Harrison as managers - a continuing arrangement, with the only non-Harrison shareholders being J.W. Hughes and R.P. Williamson. In 1884 to take advantage of the Limited Liability Law, the Charente Steamship Company Limited was formed, with the private firm of Thos. & Jas. Harrison as managers. In 1882 the firm moved from 18 Chapel Street to Mersey Chambers, a new building otherwise known as 4/8 Old Churchyard.

The firm continued to prosper and owned twenty-nine ships (all steamers) at the time of James Harrison's death in 1891. They joined the South African Conference in 1902, the aim of which was to allow greater ability to switch the seasonal cotton ships from the Gulf of Mexico. In 1904 they were a founder member of the Conference of West India, Atlantic Steamship Companies.

In 1907 the "Royal Commission on Shipping Rings" was formed in London to look into allegations by shippers that the Conference system created an unfair

monopoly, at which John William Hughes was asked to give evidence. The result found in favour of the Conference, and encouraged the growth of large shipowning groups and the gradual decline of the smaller shipowning concerns.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Harrisons owned over seventy vessels, of which twenty-seven were lost by enemy action. The Great Depression of 1929-1933 was a difficult period with fifteen ships laid up, and a modest upturn followed which led to the acquisition of modern new tonnage and the Gulf of Mexico routes of the defunct Leyland Line in 1934. Harrisons lost thirty out of forty-six ships in the Second World War including the famous *Politician*, of "Whiskey Galore" fame, which was stranded and wrecked off Scotland in 1941.

The replacements were first, ten Liberty and six Empire type ships, and then twenty motor ships (Harrison's first) built by Doxfords at Sunderland between 1947 and 1955. The berthing rights to the brandy trade were finally sold in 1955. In 1970 Harrisons decided to diversify by buying three bulk carriers, *Wanderer*, *Wayfarer* and *Warrior*, and in 1976 they joined the container consortium, Caribbean Ocean Lines (CAROL). In 1978 they had a part share with Ellermans in the *City of Durban*, a container ship in the South African European Container Services (SAECS) and in 1981 were founder members of the East African (BEACON) consortium. They also managed bulkers owned by two Hong Kong registered subsidiary companies.

During the Falklands War in 1982 three container ships were chartered as aircraft supply and transporters, including the *Astronomer* which was later purchased and converted into a helicopter base. By 1987 the Charente Steamship Co., Ltd. fleet was reduced to only three. However, several other ships were chartered or managed by Thos. & Jas. Harrison.

The Harrison Line ended in October 2000, when the last of the liner trades managed by Thos. & Jas. Harrison Ltd., on behalf of the Charente Steamship Company, had been relinquished and all rights and privileges transferred to P & O Nedlloyd. By now named Harrison Logistics, the Charente group continued to flourish, as the parent of a diverse group of companies, comprising shipping and forwarding, warehousing, logistics, marine instrumentation and chart distribution, and ownership of two bulk carriers by subsidiary Crossfish (UK) Ltd.

In January 2002, Harrison Logistics went into voluntary liquidation, and the Mersey Chambers offices were closed. However, Charente Limited continues to trade in the maritime field, particularly in chart and nautical instruments, currently based in the Port of Liverpool Building, Pier Head (2005). The company had maintained its own records at Mersey Chambers, Liverpool in a small museum on the top floor until the building was sold in November 2002, when the archives were kindly donated to the Merseyside Maritime Museum and the artefacts, ship models and paintings were sold at auction.

The Maritime Archives & Library holds other Harrison Line records, including two collections of Harrison Line masters' papers (see below DX/713 and DX/1129), together with pamphlets, newsletters and plans, and the Maritime History Department holds a model of the *Inventor* 1964.

HARRISON LINE ARCHIVE, B/HAR

Administration, 1884-1995

Legal, 1871-1990

Finance, 1869-1990

Investment, 1840-1986

Management, 1878-1981

Operational, 1825-1994

Fleet, 1819-1995

Staff, 1866-1994

Publicity, 1873-1999

War, 1939-1982

History, 1740-c.2003

Information files, 1832-1998

Research notes etc re Henry Tyrer Ltd., 1887-1978

Photographs

Plans

HARRISON RECORDS IN OTHER COLLECTIONS

Captain W.E. Williams' collection, c.1940-1964, including wartime diaries and photographs, stowage plans and notes on navigation, DX/713

Captain W.L. Ashton's collection, 1931-1977, including wage slips, 1931-1941 and a personal voyage book, 1963-1977, DX/1129

Captain W.L. Ashton's official voyage record book, 1963-1974, DX/1126

Harrison Line newsletters, 1988-1994

FURTHER READING

G. Cubbin, *Harrisons of Liverpool: A Chronicle of Ships & Men 1830-2002*, (World Ship Society, 2003)

F.E. Hyde, *Harrisons of Liverpool*, (Liverpool, 1967)

D. Haws, *Thos & Jas Harrison*, (Hereford, 1988)