The Rise and Fall of Jersey Shipyards
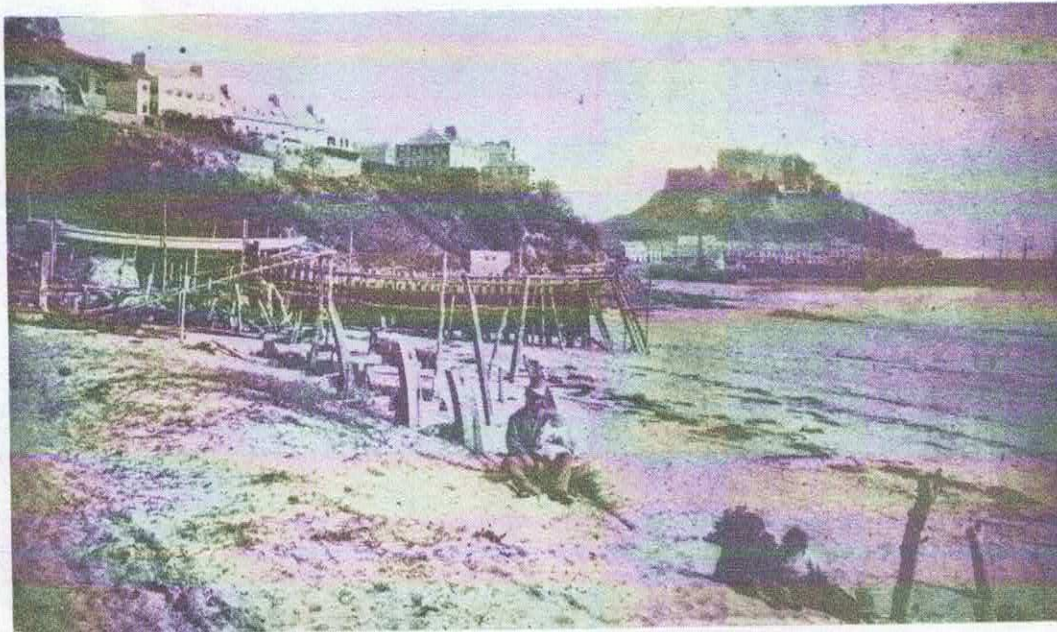
BY ROBIN S. COX

East Coast Shipyards.

the 19th century the Channel Islands ranked as one of the mc e ortant shipbuilding centres in the British Isles. The choice of the ids came about as a result of the boom in maritime trading, which caused the English yards to become unable to meet the demand. fact, coupled with the high taxation on the material used in those th were built, made the shipping merchants look elsewhere for their els. Jersey was an obvious place for the centre of such a trade as there no taxation and plentiful labour. Boats and ships built in Jersey could btained much cheaper than in England and were of a much better lity.

he few boats that had been built in the Island before the 1800's were structed of locally grown timber, but at the time of the boom, any local d was either too young to use or completely useless through age. build the ships, therefore, timber had to be imported.

he first recognised shipyard launched its first boat in August, 1821, n a site now occupied by the 'Blue Eagle' coach depot. This boat was tter, named the Hind, and was the forerunner of many to be built by ortlived but highly prosperous industry.

'ards opened up all over the Island, and by 1826—five years later— e were eight such yards turning out larger vessels such as brigs and ques, besides the smaller fishing boats, and as the years wen', and builders became more experienced, so the boats became larger. eed, the local papers of the time became almost monotonous with r" . . . the largest boat so far built in the Island was launched . . . "

lot only did the boats become larger, but the yards became even more nerous, stretching from St. Aubin's Harbour, round the south east north coasts to Bouley Bay. The yards' location necessarily dictated type of vessel built there. The yards on the south coast specialised in large boats built for the English shipping houses and for the local is who plied to the North American cod banks. Those in the harbours on the south-eastern shores built smaller boats for inter-Ir' ling, whilst those strung along the east provided all the cutters n es- for the oyster-dredging, carried on between Gorey and France. dredging was performed under the watchful eye of the Fishery Pro- ion vessel to prevent the French repeating an early episode of vessel- ing.

Returning to the south, yards were situated at one time or another in St. Aubin's Harbour, on the Fort, at La Haule, Beaumont, and Bel Royal, but the four most famous Jersey yards were to be found between First Tower and West Park. At First Tower was the large yard belonging to George Deslandes. Originally Deslandes had started in a small yard opposite the 'La Folie' and sent his first ship into the sea in 1824, but he had opened this new yard sometime later to cope with large boats, which he could not build in the cramped area of the harbour. Next to this, was 'Tower Yard', where Daniel Le Vesconte constructed his boats. Although Le Vesconte did not start until the middle 1850's, his yard held the record for the greatest number of ships on the stocks at any one time. In Novem- ber, 1863, there were no fewer than seven vessels awaiting launching.

Where today stands the 'Bay View' Hotel, was to be found the small yard of Philip Grandin, and next to that, stretching to West Park Slipway was the largest yard in the Island, that of Frederick Clarke. Like Des Landes, Clarke started in a small way, with a yard at Havre-des-Pas, but later took over a site at the end of Castle Street. With the building of the Albert Pier, he was obliged to move to his well-known yard at the foot of 'Gallows Hill', where he soon took advantage of the space provided. It became a common sight to see five ships on the stocks at one time in his yard, where 400 men were employed at the peak of the trade.

Several yards could be found in the harbours themselves, with more at Havre-des-Pas. Daniel Le Sueur at La Rocque, built for the oyster fisheries, as did Le Huquet in St. Catherine's Bay and the yards at Fort Henry and Gorey.

The products of these yards ranged from cutters to ships, the inter- mediate sizes bearing such romantic names as barques, brigs, brigantines and schooners. The boats were built on dry land, above the ordinary high water mark, where were found the timber stores and workshops. When the hull was complete, it was launched. This in the early days was effected with horses, but in 1840 Des Landes introduced the capstan to ease the vessel gently into the water. Larger boats slid along specially greased slides under their own weight. Launching took place at high tides, usually early in the morning, but despite this, the larger the boat, the larger the crowd gathered to watch it. Once in the water, it was towed into the harbour to be fitted out with sails and rigging, and other ships' furniture.

While Jersey was making its impact on the shipping world by the excellence of its construction, steam power was making a similar impression. Despite occasional essays in steamship building, the Jersey yards remained faithful to the wooden sailing ship—not only for the sake of tradition but also for that of economy. It was prohibitive to import the large quantities of sheet iron needed for the usual number of ships built in Jersey each year, and of course, there was no heavy machinery to manipulate the metal. Most, therefore, of the few steamships built here were wooden walled. The first was launched in March, 1851, from Clarke's yard. Named the *Don*, it was built round the mechanism salvaged from a boat which had been wrecked the year before. Obviously satisfied with the result, Clarke proceeded to build another boat on similar lines. This time a larger pleasure steamer, the mechanism of which was salvaged from the *Superb*, which was wrecked on the Minquiers in 1850. The new boat was named the *Rose*, and launched in July, 1851. A few more steamships were built in the Island, the most interesting being an all-iron ship of 35 tons, built in a harbour yard by George Ennis. This was the *Enterprise*, and was launched in 1859.

Merchants were not, however, so interested in Jersey now that her yards could not produce as cheap a steamship as they could a sailing ship, so a reversal of trends occurred, and the buyers returned their interests to the English yards.

To supply the trade with the necessary materials, several ancillary trades were set up in both St. Helier and St. Aubin. Blacksmiths and foundries were opened. Many of the blacksmiths were situated along Commercial Buildings, but larger yards had their own forges. Heavier items were provided by the foundries, such as the "Esplanade," the "Eagle," Le Feuvre's or Grandin's. Sails for the vessels were provided either by the large yards themselves, or by specialist sail-makers, working in sail lofts, where the sails were hung for easier working. The wood for the ships was imported by the shipload, at the peak, continuously, day after day, the timber being taken to large yards, where it was stored until required. Ropes by the hundreds of miles were made in the many local 'Rope-Walks.' They were to be found near to the yards, at St. Aubin, First Tower, Patriotic Place, Green Street and Havre-des-Pas. Here the raw imported hemp was spun into strands and woven into ropes of the required size. The largest of these was at Havre-des-Pas, where the walk was a quarter-of-a-mile in length.

The building of the railway from St. Helier to St. Aubin was strongly opposed by the shipyard owners when it was first proposed in 1862. Clarke and Le Vesconte both protested at the way that it would cut their yards in half, but by the time the Royal Assent was received in 1869, both of them had gone out of business. Le Vesconte sold his yard to the Railway Company.

Grandin and Des Landes remained on good terms with the management of the Railway Company, the latter modifying its services to accommodate the launching of ships across their line. (This was provided for in the Railway Act, the result of Clarke's protests!).

In one case, however, in January, 1875, special arrangements had to be made when a ship, the last but one to be built by Des Landes took two days to be rolled across the track to the sea. At the end of the first day the ship was placed fairly and squarely over the metals. The trains had to run up to the ship on one side, the passengers had to disembark and remount another train waiting on the other side of the ship to continue their journey. This ship, the *Cygnus*, had been on the stocks for some 18 months previous to this, a rather sorry reflection on the stagnation which had set in on the trade by this time.

Le Vesconte's Yard, or 'Tower Yard', as mentioned earlier, was sold to the Railway Company, and it was in this yard that all the stations, wagons and most of the carriages for the line were built. When the Railway Company collapsed in 1874, the land was shared out to its creditors, and later became what is now known as 'Brandy's Basket Works.'

The decline in the trade was as predictable as its growth. Iron steamships had become the vessels of the day, ships that need two commodities, iron and steam apparatus, which Jersey yards could not provide economically. So, the Jersey yards became of no further interest to the merchants, both English and local, who now left the yards with empty order books. Clarke's, for such a long time the pride of the Island, was first to close, followed by Le Vesconte in 1869.

By 1876, St. Aubin's Bay was reported to be deserted although Des Landes did build one more ship, the *Trust* in 1880. The yards at Havre-des-Pas were similarly quiet. Only those on the eastern coast were still building cutters for the also dying oyster trade.

The town ropewalks had to close down, along with many of the foundries. Sail lofts were converted into merchants' stores and the yards were cleared and sold off for building purposes.

The very last boat recorded as being launched from a local yard entered the water at Gorey in November, 1884, bringing to an end a chapter of Jersey's history.

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● *General location of local shipyards.*