

MORE FERRY MEMORIES

LIVERPOOL GARDEN FESTIVAL 1984

My goodness! It's 40 years ago since the Festival opened at Otterspool. Incorporating redundant Dingle oil facilities and landfill sites, Michael Heseltine's initiatives transformed an eyesore into a buzzing landscaped exhibition area whose success in parallel with the regeneration of the Albert Dock spear-headed Liverpool's economic revival. Mersey Ferries was presented with a special berth alongside the Promenade to provide a delightful mode of transport for some Festival goers. Tidal limitations affected times of access, and I well remember talking to the usually cheerful Tony Hill (Ferries Manager) as he anxiously peered over the railings, watching that the rapidly falling tide would not ground the vessel before departure!

THE FOG BELLS

The mournful bells would toll from Woodside and Seacombe terminals whenever the fogs descended, guiding the vessels the last 200 metres or so to the stages after a river crossing supervised by the radar system operator at Seacombe. In the 70's and 80's the ferries would sail when passengers at the stern could not see the bow. How did they manage before the technology of World War II was rolled out? I hope the bells are preserved somewhere - ideally on the new stages! Despite GPS navigation equipment on most vessels, and a smaller number of ships using the Mersey, the current rules say that ferry crossings should cease whenever it is not possible to see halfway across the river!

CROWDED FERRIES

In the late 40's, the 50's and 60's, Liverpool's shipping offices employed many from Wirral who preferred travelling "over the water" from Seacombe and Woodside to the road and rail tunnels. At weekends and Bank Holiday the flow reversed with packed ferries to New Brighton, especially if one lived away from train services. No cross-river buses in those days. In 1939, the shipping book "Shipping Wonders of the World" stated that the combined Mersey Ferries carried over 36 million passengers. A few years ago Merseytravel thought that 800,000 was a good year!

WAITING BUSES AT SEACOMBE

Outside the terminal, the yellow (or rather "Sea Green") buses waited in echelon "Le Mans" style for the ferry passengers, and for the Inspector's commanding whistle which would release them to all parts of the Borough. There was a similar scene at Woodside with Birkenhead Corporation and Crosville buses.

WALKING THE DECK

In the heydays of commuter travel it was the custom to walk the upper deck in an anti-clockwise direction – woe betide anyone who did otherwise! Why the walk? Fresh air, exercise, changing views Who knows!

THE RADIATORS

Reliable boiling hot radiators in the saloons to warm you up in the depths of winter, for extra comfort, no doubt using surplus heat from the engines.

THE WEATHER

The weather has always, even to this day, provided a challenge to mariners, the Mersey being no exception for it can be as any treacherous ocean or sea. However, with the new powered gangways, gone are the days when one risked life and limb to "climb aboard", for a heaving gangway in a force 8 gale was no place for the faint-hearted. In fog, if you could see 20 feet to the boat, you were assured the service was running that day!

Andrew Hodgson and Terry Edgar

NOTICE OF AGM

The 44th AGM will be held on Tuesday 28th May 2024

at the YMCA Whetstone Lane Birkenhead at 7.30 pm.

Please see enclosed Agenda for full details

Our speaker will again be our own Malcolm McDonald who will talk on the topic

"Transatlantic from Liverpool"

Owing to health problems, Geoff Holmes has now decided to relinquish the post of Hon. Newsletter Editor, and also retire from the Committee. We are still without an Hon. Secretary since the former office-holder moved to Scotland. This puts pressure on the existing Committee. Offers to fill these posts would be welcome. We are also seeking ordinary Committee Members. In the first instance volunteers may be co-opted to the Committee.

We very much thank Geoff, a retired Master Mariner, for producing the Newsletter twice a year since April 2012. The Committee has, of course, also benefitted at its meetings from his valuable maritime experience. He is comfortably living in his own flat at the Mariners Park in Wallasey.

Joan Roberts, our Publicity and Marketing Officer, also has health problems, and cannot attend the AGM. We send them both our best wishes.

Administratively, it has been necessary to raise our subscriptions to £3 per annum from the 1st April 2024. We all know how the postal charges are leaping up, and when we think about it, twice yearly mailings mop up a very significant chunk of our subscriptions in stamps alone!

Similarly, we have raised our Dock and River Cruise tickets by £2 to ensure that the event remains viable. See the enclosed poster for full details. Please encourage your friends to join us. We limit the tickets to 250 to ensure comfort aboard. Still good value!

CHRISTMAS DRAW 2023 PRIZEWINNERS

Drawn at Seacombe Terminal on 14th December

£100 Philip Ball Carnforth

£ 50 A.Slater New Brighton

£25 Phil Spencer £25 Helen Hughes

(telephone number only)

£25 Trevor Walsh Nelson £25 Paul Smith Chester

£25 Syd Taylor Bromborough

Congratulations to the winners!

Thanks to all participants and to
our organiser Gordon Ditchfield



Royal Iris (1951) sadly
moored in the Thames
20th April 2023

In the background the
Thames Barrier and
Canary Wharf
Image James Edgar

Friends of the Ferries Committee:

Hon.Chairman A.Hodgson, Hon.Vice-Chairman and Hon.Treasurer M.McDonald BA. FCCA., Hon.Secretary (vacant),
Hon.Membership Secretary G.Ditchfield, Hon.Publicity and Marketing Officer Miss J.Roberts, Newsletter Editor (vacant),
Committee Members A.Blizard, T.Edgar, R.Peers.

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Friends of the Ferries

Across the Mersey.

Newsletter

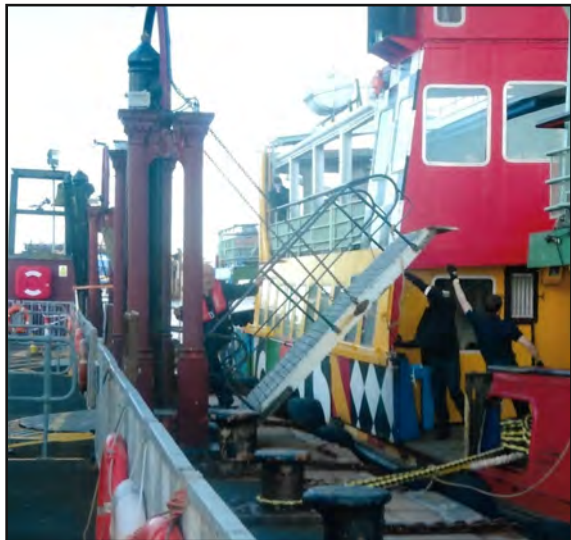
This Newsletter is circulated to members to keep them in touch events that
have been happening since the formation of the Friends of the Ferries.



END OF AN ERA FOR WOODSIDE STAGE!

The stage, first installed in September 1985, is now closed and due for removal after nearly 39 years. Its replacement is being funded by Government grants for the Woodside area regeneration. Of particular interest is the pair of manually operated gangways which were transferred from the previous stage. Health and Safety advances will mean that powered gangways will be introduced, as installed at the modern Pier Head and Seacombe terminals. Regular ferry passengers will miss the "iconic" clatter as the gangways were lowered and raised. The stagemen will be glad to see them go, as their operation required dexterity and athleticism, sometimes involving running up the gangway when it was halfway up (at 45 degrees) in order to force it down. Their relatively simple design, mounted on a turntable and with a hinged gangway, provided flexibility, accommodating wave and vessel movements. Occasional damage was easily repaired! Perhaps one can be saved for posterity?

Image Gordon Ditchfield



These images reveal the old fluted support columns and the turntable. Note the small crowns at the tops of the black columns, denoting that the ferry service is part of the King's highway!
Images Gordon Ditchfield



DREDGING NEEDED
Radio Merseyside Travel News is now regularly reporting that ferry commuter services are being cancelled because of shallow depths of water at the Pier Head during certain tide cycles. This cycle is complex and varies fortnightly, monthly and seasonally, and can be affected by wind speeds and barometric pressure. Recently, however, some cancellations have occurred when tides were not especially low. This is not good news for commuters as the lowest tides tend to be in the morning and evening, just when travelling to and from work on time is important. We hope to find out from Merseytravel as we go to press what solutions are being sought, and particularly who is the responsible agency. The problem may be localised as we have no reports that the Cruise Liner Terminal is adversely affected.

MEETINGS WITH MERSEY FERRIES
Your Committee met at Merseytravel HQ at Mann Island Liverpool on 5th December 2023 and discussed with Gary Evans (Assistant Director for Customer Delivery) and Ian Hayman (Mersey Ferries) the following agenda: Proposals and programme for the new ferry vessel, following receipt of the overpriced May 2021 tender; Proposals and programme for the refurbishment of the *Snowdrop*; Proposals and programme for the Woodside stage and relationship with Wirral Council's regeneration of the Woodside area (including the Big Heritage expansion scheme at the U-boat exhibition); Future of the *Royal Iris of the Mersey*. Apart from the last item, progress we were told was being made on all matters, although limited information was forthcoming. Woodside funding has to be spent by March 2026. The phased upgrading of the *Snowdrop* has already commenced. Ideas are sought for future uses of the *Royal Iris*. A further update meeting was arranged for the 19th March, but this was postponed to 17th April. We intend to report the outcome of this meeting in the Chairman's letter enclosed with this mailing. We need to produce and print the Newsletter by that later date to give sufficient time to advertise the Dock and River Cruise. The agenda for the April meeting with Merseytravel will be similar to the December one, with the addition of the dredging problem at the Pier Head. Meanwhile, on the 13th December, the Liverpool City Region Mayor Steve Rotheram issued a Press Release announcing the good news that an agreement had been reached with Cammell Laird to build the new ferry. A detailed specification is awaited.

Friends of the Ferries
Across the Mersey

DOCK AND RIVER CRUISE

By a famous Mersey ferry, either "Snowdrop" or "Royal Iris of the Mersey".

INCLUDING
EASTHAM CHANNEL and ROYAL SEAFORTH DOCK
Saturday 22nd June 2024.

DEPARTS:
SEACOMBE 12.00,
LIVERPOOL 12.15.

RETURNS: 17.00 approx.
FARE: ADULT £28.00 CHILD £14.00

Tickets on sale at both Seacombe and Liverpool ferry terminals
or by post with S.A.E. from
Membership Secretary,
7 Foxcovers Road,
Bebington, Wirral, Merseyside, CH63 3EQ.

PLEASE MAKE CHEQUES PAYABLE TO:
"Friends of the Ferries"
For all information please telephone:
0151-334-2685



Caledonian MacBrayne ferry Hebrides leaving Cammell Laird March 2024
The yard has seen five of these Scottish ferries undergoing their winter overhaul this year. The Caledonian Isles was also seen in Birkenhead Docks in the same month. Image Gordon Ditchfield

BIRKENHEAD CORPORATION'S FERRY UPTON
Delivered November 1925 from Cammell Laird; scrapped March 1953 at Southampton
There is an interesting link between the past and the present concerning the history of the Upton.
On 19th February 2019 there was a notable event on the Mersey when the freight vehicle ferry Red Kestrel was launched.

Red Kestrel was launched by Cammell Laird for Red Funnel, the Southampton-based ferry company formed in 1861 offering services from that city to the Isle of Wight. Summer season excursions were also operated to Island resorts and the nearby South Coast, but these ceased due to reduced demand in 1968. Their last excursion vessel was the Balmoral, now in preservation, and a recent visitor to the Mersey. Red Funnel has developed a range of vessels over the years to cope with increased passenger and vehicle demands, and Red Kestrel represents their first new-build ferry for commercial vehicles only, entering service to East Cowes in May 2019. Although Red Kestrel was the first ship built by Cammell Laird for Red Funnel, it was not the first time that a ship built at Birkenhead had been a member of the Red Funnel fleet. The previous vessel was the former Mersey ferry Upton, which had been built in 1925 by Cammell Laird for Birkenhead Corporation.

Upton and the Rock Ferry service
Birkenhead Corporation is best known now for its ferry service between Woodside and Liverpool. However, in earlier years it had also operated a separate ferry service from New Ferry and Rock Ferry to Liverpool, which it had taken over from a private operator in 1897. Initially, the Corporation's service was operated by the old Woodside ferries Wirral and Mersey. The first vessel built specifically for the Corporation's service was Storeton, completed in 1910. She was similar to contemporary Woodside ferries, but smaller, in acknowledgement of the lower numbers using that service. Following collision-damage by a coaster in 1922 the New Ferry pier was lost and services were restricted to Rock Ferry only but with an increased frequency of every 20 minutes. It had been planned to build a sister to Storeton, but the 1914-18 war intervened, and it was not until November 1925 that Upton was delivered. She was the first of a series of five almost identical ferries built between 1925 and 1933 by Cammell Laird for Birkenhead Corporation (the other four were Hinderton, Thurston, Claughton and Bidston, all for the Woodside service). However, Upton was not as wide as the other four, since she did not need to carry as many passengers, but she was of a similar design to previous Birkenhead ferries. Nevertheless, one innovation was the introduction of a covered cab, with an engine-room telegraph, either side of the central wheelhouse, to protect the captain and mate from the weather when docking - earlier vessels left the crew exposed to the elements! She had three lounges, all on the main deck, with the after one reserved for ladies, and she could carry 1,113 passengers. Upton operated the Rock Ferry service in conjunction with Storeton. Relief sailings were provided by Wirral. On occasions, a Rock Ferry vessel was used on the Woodside night service, which was the only means of crossing the river at night, because of lower running costs.

Decline of the Rock Ferry service
The Rock Ferry service had been unprofitable for many years, but the Corporation had always resisted any closure proposals. In 1939, the pier and landing stage needed repairs expected to cost £8,000 (approximately £700,000 in today's money). The Mersey Tunnel Joint Committee, which had covered all losses on the Woodside and Rock Ferry services since the opening of the Mersey Tunnel, resolved to close the Rock Ferry service and to sell Storeton. The last crossings of the service, on 30 June 1939, were taken by Upton. The final sailing was at 22.20 from Rock Ferry, and on arrival at Liverpool was greeted by a crowd singing Auld Lang Syne. The Rock Ferry pier itself survived, and in 1955 Cammell Laird bought it and converted it to de-gas oil tankers, so that they could then be dry-docked for repairs. Although that use ceased some years ago, the remains of the pier still exist in 2024, well over 100 years after it was built.

Wartime
After the start of the 1939-45 war, Upton was requisitioned by the Ministry of War Shipping, and was used for local tender duties. In June 1945, after the end of the war in Europe, Birkenhead Corporation agreed to sell Upton to the Galway Harbour Commissioners, who before the war had bought the former Birkenhead ferry Lancashire as a tender for transatlantic liners. However, Upton was not released from requisition in time, so the sale was cancelled, probably because the prospects for an uplift in transatlantic passengers from Galway was unlikely.

Sale to Red Funnel and eventual scrapping
Upton was sold in April 1946 to Red Funnel, which paid £15,000 for her. The company had lost several ships during the war and needed to restore its fleet numbers quickly. It seems likely that Upton was the only one burning coal. She retained her name and was refitted for her new activities. This included a new bridge, crew washroom, the linking of lounges, and bar and catering facilities. After two weeks on the Ryde service, the season ended, and she was laid up. In May 1947, she operated the Bournemouth to Swanage service, using open sea piers which Upton found difficult to use when rough. By June, she was operating from Southampton to Ryde, but at only 10 knots she could not keep time and also had difficulty berthing without the benefit of a strong Mersey tidal flow. A deep draught made her unsuitable for accessing Southsea pier, so that when passenger numbers fell away in 1950 due to an Isle of Wight polio outbreak, and the Ryde service was combined with that to Southsea, the Upton was withdrawn and laid up. Found unsuitable for tug/tender duties, she was sent for scrapping at Northam, Southampton in March 1953, in her 28th year.

Malcolm McDonald



Red Kestrel in the Mersey on completion for Red Funnel, 2019
Capacity 12 HGV's and 12 passengers. 12.5 knots. Image Gordon Ditchfield