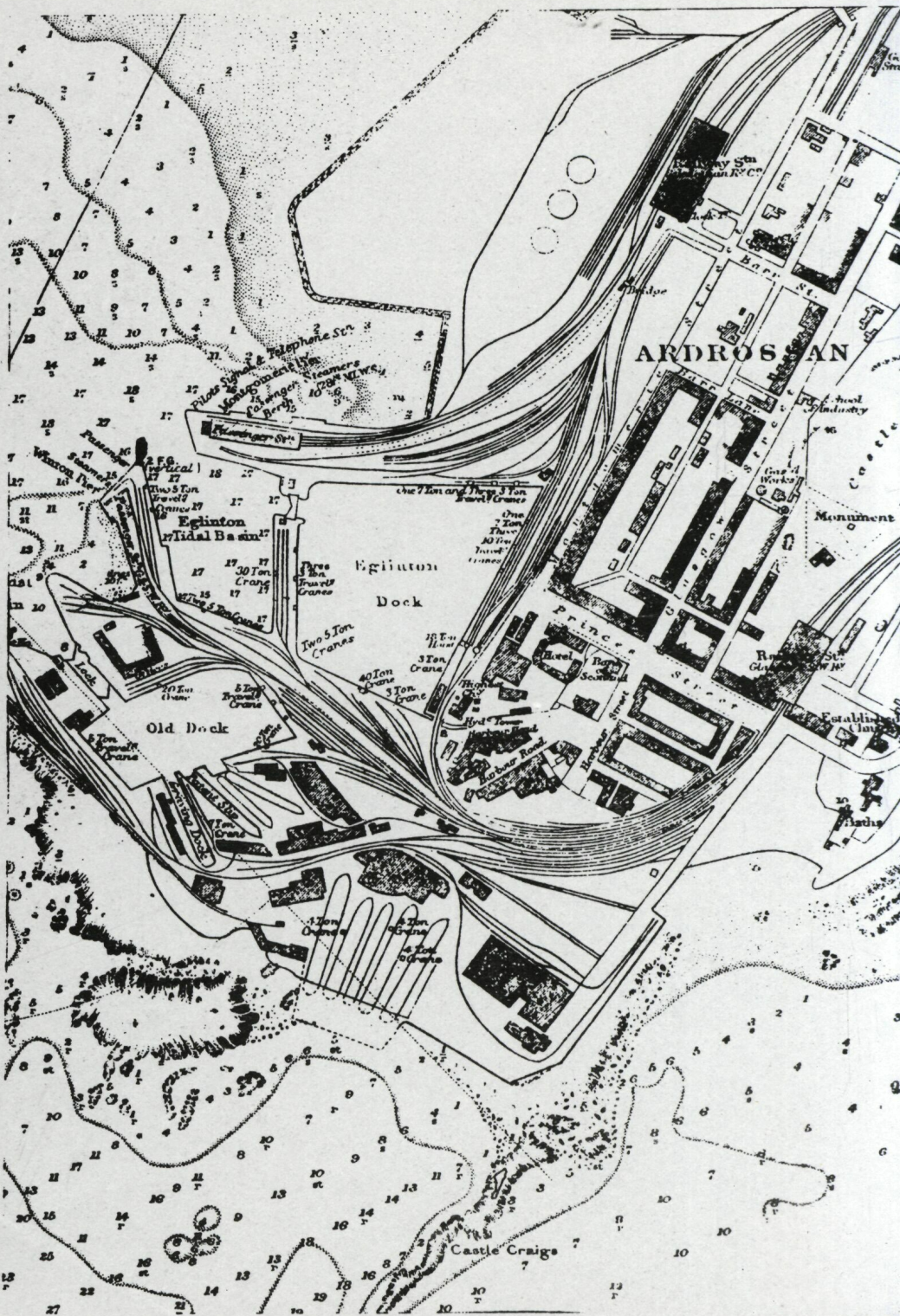


ARDROSSAN SHIPYARDS : STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

1825 - 1983



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ARDROSSAN SHIPYARDS:-

STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

1825-1983

by

Catriona Levy

and

Ardrossan Local History Workshop

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INTRODUCTION

This short history of shipbuilding in Ardrossan emerges from work done by the Local History Workshop set up in November 1982 by the W.E.A.

The intention in setting up a local history workshop was to explore an aspect of the town's history by tapping the memories of local people. After discussion in the workshop shipbuilding emerged as an industry that was regarded as having been very important to Ardrossan which had recently declined.

Interviews with men who worked in the shipyard provided the main sources of information for writing this history. However, the workshop also referred to other resources such as local newspapers. Although I as tutor offered to write up the history its preparation has been a collective effort. The support, interest and hard work put in by the workshop members have been invaluable. Thanks are therefore due to Mr. and Mrs. Aitken, Mrs. Allan, Mr. and Mrs. Ayton, Mr. Bernthal, Mr. Flinn, Dr. Lockhurst, Miss McNeilly, Mr. Smith and Mr. and Mrs. Wilson. A special debt of gratitude is owed to the men who gave us their memories. (Their names are listed in the Bibliography). The Ardrossan Harbour Company, the Ardrossan Public Library, the local Customs and Excise Office and Saltcoats Museum also gave us kind help and encouragement while the workshop was housed courtesy of the Resource Centre, Princes Street, Ardrossan. Special thanks are due to Cunninghame District Libraries for sharing the costs of

of producing this booklet with the W.E.A.

The W.E.A. hopes to continue its work in collecting people's memories of life in Ardrossan. The history workshop meets on Wednesdays in Princes Street Resource Centre and is presently exploring the history of Ardrossan Harbour. Any assistance or information would be very welcome.

Catriona Levy
Part-time Tutor
Workers' Educational Association

CHAPTER 1

Early Days, 1825-1914

The shipyard has been the focus of our study. However, the starting point for Ardrossan itself and for shipbuilding was the harbour development begun by the Earl of Eglinton in 1804-5. The harbour was linked with a proposed canal from Glasgow to the Ayrshire coast. Saltcoats then already had a harbour but Thomas Telford, the famous civil engineer, recommended Ardrossan as the canal's outlet to the sea:-

'Ardrossan Bay is a fituation peculiarly well calculated for an extenfive and fafe harbour. A rocky head of about half a mile in length, forms a complete protection against the fouth and weft winds: and the fmall island called the Horfe Ifle forms a complete protection against the only other reach, of fea, which comes from the North End of the Ifland of Arran'.¹

Initially boundless optimism surrounded the canal project, Telford writing that 'I know of few canals that afford an equal profpect of becoming profitable as fpeculation'² but it was ill-fated. By 1819 £100,000 had been spent and the canal had only got from Glasgow to Johnstone. The withdrawal of the original shareholders and the refusal of an appeal for government aid left the Eglinton family holding an unwanted baby. The canal project was finally shelved in 1840 overtaken both by the deepening of the Clyde and the coming of the railway to the Ayrshire coast.

Harbour development in Ardrossan was more successful than the canal although there were long delays in construction. The foundation stone of the harbour was laid in July 1806 amid local ceremony. There were fireworks and a cannon was fired

fired from the Cannon Hill to mark the ocasión. The first foreign vessel arrived in 1810 but work did not begin on the first Wet Dock and the graving dock until after the arrival of the railway in 1840. Business done in the harbour increased dramatically after 1840 rising from 2,000 tons in 1830, to 31,000 in 1835, to 118,000 tons in 1845 and 260,000 tons in 1855.³

The geographic features which made Ardrossan suitable for harbour development also made it a good site for building ships and so shipbuilding developed alongside the harbour.

Matthew Henderson began building small ships of 100 tons and under in 1825 and continued in business until his retiral in 1844. A Mr. Fyfe also built ships, as did Mr. Peter Barclay and later Mr. Joseph Russell. Meanwhile the Boyd family made a speciality of building rowing boats at the Inches. However, shipbuilding on a large scale in Ardrossan followed the completion of the railways and of the harbour. In 1842 John Barr, Ardrossan's first Provost, and James Shearer started their shipbuilding business on land leased from the Ardrossan Harbour Company. Later the business changed hands and was continued under the title of the Ardrossan Shipbuilding Company. This company and its leases were taken over during the 1890's by the Ardrossan Dry Dock and Shipping Co. Ltd.⁴

Ardrossan Shipyard was originally designed for the construction of wooden ships. Building took place in what was known until recently as the 'Old Yard'. At the turn of the century this yard had three building berths, a graving dock for

for ships of up to 1,000 tons and a slip for repairs of boats up to 400 tons. It would be a mammoth task to compile a list of all the ships built at Ardrossan⁵ but the local Register of Shipping from 1859 provides some information about ships built at Ardrossan.

Typical among the earlier ships were the Anne Barclay (1854) and the William Knox (1859).⁶ Both were small, single-masted, square-rigged, carvel-built boats with gross tonnages of 25.7 and 29.94 respectively. The Anne Barclay was owned by David Robertson, Mariner, Ardrossan, while the William Knox was jointly owned by Robert Knox, Kilbirnie, Merchant, and Mr. Barclay, Ardrossan, Shipbuilder. It was not unusual to find the shipbuilder holding part-shares in ships. This was often a short-term arrangement suggesting that it was a means of guaranteeing orders for ships.

In the mid-nineteenth century most of the Ardrossan-built ships registered at the port were under 100 tons, in use either as fishing boats or small cargo boats. There were some exceptions such as the Kirelaw, a three-masted, barque-rigged, carvel-built boat of 319.01 gross tonnage built in 1848.⁷ The Register obviously cannot provide a complete picture of shipbuilding activities, however, being confined to those boats whose owners were based at or near Ardrossan. Ardrossan on several occasions launched what was at the time the largest wooden vessel built in Scotland. One of these was the clipper ship, the Contest, registered at 1,160 tons, and launched on 16 September 1853.

The launch of the Contest was the first big local event to be covered by the Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald which declared:-

'It is not a little gratifying that a town which fifty years ago was scarcely in existence should now be able to launch the largest timber-built vessel which has ever been launched on the Clyde. This, no doubt, is chiefly due to the public-spirited conduct of the Earl of Eglinton whose exertions for the good of the town have been unremitting and of the most liberal description. Associated with him have been a number of gentlemen, amongst the foremost of whom we may name Messrs. Barr and Shearer, who by their enterprise and skill as shipbuilders have aided in rendering Ardrossan famous as a shipbuilding and shipping port.⁸

The nineteenth century was one of technological innovation in shipbuilding. Centuries of sailpower gave way to steam power and wood to iron and later steel. Innovation came gradually however. In 1900 one-third of the world's shipping was still driven by sail. Cast-iron boats had been in use on canals since the 1800's and iron was fairly widely introduced into ship frameworks from 1840 but wooden frames remained the norm for Ardrossan's smaller craft up to 1869.⁹ The first steel ship built in Ardrossan was launched on 31 August 1888 and most ships built after that date were steel ships.

Apart from shipbuilding ship repairs were always an important source of work for the Ardrossan yard. According to the Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald 'the chief work of the yard was repairs, much of which was done on the old sugar clippers. In addition, considerable salvage work was undertaken'.¹⁰

There were severe fluctuations of trade throughout the nineteenth century. In 1857 there was little shipbuilding done in Ardrossan 'on account of the Crimean War'¹¹ while in June 1882 the Herald reported:-

'The

'The decline of shipbuilding at the port of Ardrossan has depressed business in town and hope of the yard becoming a centre of employment of building iron ships has depressed ... Most of Ardrossan's carpenters had to look for work elsewhere ... ,¹²Shops are closing, tired of waiting for the turn of prosperity.'

However, by 1888 the yard was reported to be handling much repair work and equipment was renewed. In 1898 the Ardrossan Shipbuilding Company passed into the hands of the Ardrossan Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Co. Ltd. In 1902 the largest vessel hitherto built in Ardrossan was launched, the Agethi. The yard plant was further improved and modernised in 1907 and in 1912 the Herald reported 'prosperity' at the shipyard.¹³

Allowing for trade fluctuations, the shipyard was a major local employer. In 1851 Ardrossan had a population of 2,071 while Barr and Shearer employed over 300 men in 1854.¹⁴ While all ships were wooden, shipwrights, carpenters and joiners along with blacksmiths would have formed the majority of the tradesmen. The number of trades working in the yard was increased by the introduction of iron and steel. Generally, the arrival of the new 'black squad' headed by platers and riveters led to demarcation disputes between workers, particularly involving shipwrights who began to encroach upon joiners' work as they lost work to platers and riveters. Ardrossan was unlikely to escape the tensions arising from demarcation but there is no indication of demarcation disputes at the yard up to 1914 although disputes occurred at other yards.

The Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald on a number of occasions reported that there was 'little grumbling about wages'¹⁵ at the shipyard. During the 1850's apprentices were paid 5/- per week

week and journeymen 21/- per week, later increased to 24/- per week. This was relatively good pay for this period and probably helps to explain the absence of trade union militancy at the yard. Ardrossan did not appear to be drawn into the bitter lockouts at the Clyde shipyards in 1877 or 1897. In Ardrossan itself the labourers employed by the Harbour Company appeared to be more militant than the shipyard men. There was an unsuccessful strike of labourers at Ardrossan dockyard in August 1897¹⁶ while a particularly bitter dispute at the harbour in 1912 hit the headlines.¹⁷ Dockers' leaders, Ben Tillet and Tom Mann addressed the strikers. That dispute reached an unsatisfactory conclusion when an additional farthing per ton was granted for overtime only with the strikers to get restarted when the company needed them.

However, in 1892 there was a trade union presence in the shipyard. A souvenir pamphlet published on the opening of the Eglinton Dock in that year commented on the prominence of 'a magnificent banner belonging to the Shipwright's Association, and valued at £85, attracting all eyes'¹⁸ amid the shipyard trades contingent taking part in the procession through the town. Union membership was confined to the skilled men, however, the Boilermaker's Union and the Shipwright's Association being the most prominent. The shipyard labourers were not unionised until after the Second World War.

The preference of local men to stay in Ardrossan rather than move for work probably also explains limited trade union activity. Another factor was the strict terms of contracts of employment at the yard. Jail could be the penalty for

for disobeying orders. This makes it all the more remarkable that on the occasion (undated) when the apprentice shipwrights struck work they gained an extra 1/- per week, no mean percentage increase! Not all local strikers were so fortunate. In August 1867 the crew of the Harvest Home owned by Barr and Shearer were sentenced to eight weeks' imprisonment with hard labour when they refused to put the tug to sea.¹⁹

Indentured apprentices were strictly bound to the yard. As an apprentice shipwright from 1861 to 1866 John Arnott was bound 'to serve his said masters, Messrs. Barr and Shearer, honestly, faithfully and diligently, in all things lawful and proper, by night and by day, work-day and holiday, as his said masters may require, either in Ardrossan, or elsewhere, if need be'. He was to obey 'all lawful commands', not 'to purloin or embezzle his master's goods or gear' (on pain of paying double the value of the loss) and not to absent himself without liberty (with the loss of two days' wages and one day's wages if absent on a doctor's note). In exchange he was 'to be taught, learned and instructed in the Art and business of a ship carpenter and paid 5/- per week for the first year, 6/- per week for the second and third year, and 7/- per week for the fourth and fifth years of his apprenticeship'. The contract bound each party to pay a £20 penalty should they default on the agreement.²⁰

The position of apprentices was of major concern to trade unions from the 1880's onward. The historians, Pollard and Robertson, identify two main concerns: first, concern about the quality of the apprenticeship system, with indenture dying out,

out, and second, concern about the ratio of apprentices to journeymen.²¹ Ardrossan would have satisfied trade union anxieties on the first count - apprentices were indentured - but not on the second. National agreements settled the ratio of apprentices to journeymen at 2 : 7 in 1893 but the Ardrossan yard seems to have had a far higher ratio. In 1860 100 apprentices and 60 journeymen were employed!²² Allowing for trade fluctuations and apprentices being kept on while tradesmen were paid off this was an exceptionally high ratio.

The topics of apprenticeships, trades, industrial relations, and working conditions can be explored more fully for the yard's later history. In the absence of living memories or either company or trade union records for the shipyard, only a hazy sketch of conditions at the yard in the nineteenth century can be built up chiefly via the Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald.

The workmen would have had little leisure time, particularly in the earlier part of the century when a half-holiday on Saturday or a summer holiday period was unknown. The only holidays were the afternoon of the annual Fair Day, the day of the Races, the day of the annual outing given by the employers and the day following, with two days at the New Year. Arran was a favourite venue for the annual outing and it is on record that the natives of Arran became apprehensive when the Ardrossan carpenters stepped ashore! Boating was the most popular recreation with the annual regatta arousing much excitement.²³ Local football arrived with the turn of the century. Ardrossan's Winton Rovers and Ardrossan Celtic were formed as junior clubs in 1899 and 1901 respectively. Ardrossan Celtic disbanded in 1913

1913 but Winton Rovers established themselves in Ayrshire football, buying their own ground at Winton Park in 1926.²⁴

Given the craft skills employed by the shipyard workers it is not surprising that a launch was heralded by much stir and excitement. The Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald reports 'A dance took place at night, and on these occasions the apprentices donned a special dress - blue jacket, yellow vest and white jean trousers'²⁵

The yellow vests would have had a good airing at the turn of the century. The yard then had a healthy order book and between 1907 and 1915 a number of notable ships were built:- the Canonbar, Maianbar and Gunbar for the North Coast Steam Navigation Co. Ltd., New South Wales; the Isleford, one of the earliest diesel-engined vessels built in Britain; ss. Kinabalu built for the Sabah Steamship Co. Ltd., Borneo; ss. Robina, for the new Morecambe Pier Co. Ltd., a passenger vessel intended for excursion services; and the single-screw tug Joffre for the Lawson Steam Tug Co., South Shields, at that time the most powerful tug boat plying on the North East coast.

During the 1914-18 war paddle and screw mine-sweeping vessels, single and twin-screw tug boats, a large stern wheeler, and other vessels were built for the Admiralty and Inland Water Transport Services.

In 1913 a new Company Board was formed with Sir Hector MacNeil as Chairman and Mr. E. Aitken-Quack as Managing Director.

Director. In 1916 under the new management and in anticipation of continuing demand for ships the laying of a new yard at the Inches, South Yard, was commenced. Thus opened the most ambitious phase of shipbuilding in Ardrossan.

CHAPTER 2

Heyday, New Yard, 1916-1930

The building of the South Yard was a massive undertaking. In 1920 the Shipbuilder magazine reported:-

'When the new directorate assumed control in 1913 they found the works practically without any organisation, the machinery antiquated, and the buildings wholly insufficient'.¹

The company immediately set to work on renovating the Old Yard and in 1914 secured options on the adjacent site. Building began in 1916 after the necessary government sanction had been obtained. During the laying out of this yard about 180,000 tons of rock and cold-blast slag (obtained locally) were deposited on the site in order to form the building berths. On the South and West sides of the New Yard a good deal of ground was reclaimed from the sea to provide sites for the various sheds and storage accommodation. Practically all of this work was carried out by Ardrossan Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company itself, hiring labour and buying materials.

The completed South Yard covered about 22 acres while the old North Yard took in 11 acres. The South Yard contained five building berths ranging from 400-500 feet in length and 'all with practically unlimited launching run into the Firth of Clyde'.² The yard was fitted up with the most modern shipbuilding machinery:- electric, hydraulic and pneumatic plant, multiple punches, 'Toplis' electric luffing cranes, electrically driven derrick cranes, steel derricks worked with electric winches, steel uprights for supporting staging and

and building berths.

A lease was also obtained from the Ardrossan Harbour Company of the Wet Dock, into which vessels built in the Old Yard were launched. The dock could also be used both for repairs and as a fitting-out basin allowing vessels to be entirely completed at Ardrossan instead of going to Greenock or Glasgow to receive their propelling machinery. When the New Yard was completed in 1920 Ardrossan had a great potential shipbuilding capacity. The Shipbuilder attributed the remarkable expansion of the company's activities 'to the energy and enthusiasm of the managing director, Mr. E. Aitken-Quack, J.P.'³ The expansion increased the number of shipyard employees from under 200 in 1913 to 2,300 in 1920.

The first keel plate was formally laid in the New Yard in September 1918, and the first vessel, ss. Hunstanworth, (2,580 gross tons), built for a Newcastle firm, was launched in 1919. Within twelve months four other launches were made:-
ss. Glassford (2,580 gross tons); ss. Poljana (3,856 gross tons);
ss. Dunkerquois (3,160 gross tons); and ss. Skrymer (1,990 gross tons).

As the Shipbuilder went to press in 1920 'all the nine building berths in the company's two yards were occupied with vessels ranging from 500 to 6,600 tons gross, including several with extensive passenger accommodation'.⁴ This was the height of a brief post-war shipbuilding boom. In January 1920 the Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald reported:-

'All the shipyards (in Ayrshire) have their berths full. In the 4 yards the splendid record was achieved of 30 vessels launched ... Ayrshire shipbuilding should continue briskly during 1920, as many large orders were on hand. Of course, world conditions in this line are altered and competition from abroad, especially America, may in time affect the British shipbuilding trade'.⁵

However, Quack's annual report published in December 1920 forecast a slack time ahead in 1921 after four launches expected in January.⁶

Nonetheless, prosperity at the shipyard in 1920 must at least have limited the problems of depression, unemployment and poverty in Ardrossan and Saltcoats. These were discussed by the Ardrossan Co-operative Society in March 1920. The distress was particularly acute among the miners, then reeling from post-war cuts in wages. Later in 1920 the Ardrossan Co-operative Society donated £10 either in goods or in cash towards a soup kitchen in Ardrossan while in May 1920 the Scottish Wholesale Society gave the Ardrossan Society a grant of £25 to help relieve distress. By the end of 1920 the local Board decided to ask the Miner's Union to pay £91 for goods given to unemployed miners. The Board made several donations to relieve distress over the next four years but felt itself unable to donate to the Glasgow Relief Fund while Gala Days were stopped. A canvass of members gradually improved sales, however, and activity at the shipyard must have contributed to this improvement.⁷ The expansion of the yard can be seen as a bright spot against a background of recession and social distress.

It was only natural that high hopes should ride on the capacity of the New Yard and the two following extracts from

from interviews reflect the confidence that was felt in the
New Yard:-

'The New Yard at Ardrossan had a lot going for it at first. Its overheads were cheap in comparison with Lower Clyde and Greenock yards. There were no transport problems as the railway ran direct into the shipyard so there was no difficulty with transporting heavy parts or equipment to the yard. The site of the New Yard was a natural place to build ships'.⁸

'There was a good deal of confidence in the capacity of the New Yard. The QE2 could have been launched there! There was no need for drag chains as in the Old Yard. The depth was 40 feet at low tide. The New Yard employed 2 - 3,000 men in about 15 different trades. The platers' shed was the largest department employing 30-40 platers with helpers'.⁹

The opening of the New Yard transformed the company from a chiefly local employer into a firm taking on men from all over the West of Scotland and from Northern Ireland. The tendency was for these men to be single, living in lodgings in the town. This gave a stimulus to local trade, including that of the Co-op. Lodgings could come to 30/- per week. There was some dormitory accommodation at the yard which also owned property in the town, including houses for its managers. The yard also bought Castlecraigs, now the Civic Centre in Ardrossan, for use as a social club. Fond memories are held of its specially sprung dance floor! The yard became one of the first shipbuilding companies on the Clyde to set up a welfare department. In connection with this there were summer camps and a cadet corps for the apprentices.

In general, however, relations between management and men were poor. The Old and New Yards were run separately. Tom Rogers was manager of the New Yard for most of the '20s, replaced

replaced in about 1928 by John Coleman. The position was explained:-

'In the yards workers were frightened to death of management - that was why work at sea was more human if rough, tough and nasty - in the yard a man could be sacked on the spot. Aitken Quack who owned (managing director) the yard in the '20s once walked through the yards smoking a large cigar when he came on a draughtsman standing outside his shed, looking at a drawing and smoking a cigarette. He was sacked on the spot'.¹⁰

It was added:-

'The rule against smoking had nothing to do with safety. The reasoning was that if a man was smoking he was not working. There were all kinds of restrictions, for example, a man could only spend 7 minutes in the loo a day and he was only allowed to go once. Each man had a round brass check which he put in at dinner and at night and which had to be handed in before going to the toilet ... Men could be dismissed for no apparent reason. One man was only away from the yard three days when he was recalled. It was a form of 'suspension'. It was the sort of thing that happened to many men including my father. Men were paid off and taken on at will ... That was not just the nature of work in shipyards ... it was also the nature of the times.'¹¹

Funds of stories surround J.C. Coleman, last manager of the New Yard. J.C., as he was known, was a big burly Ulsterman, larger than life. He was supposed to have claimed that the three greatest men in the world had the initials J.C. :- Julius Caesar, Jesus Christ, and John Coleman. He was described as having a lot of good ways about him but at times being hard and unreasonable, and ready to dismiss men in the heat of the moment. On occasions his bark was worse than his bite, however. Afternoon tea breaks were barred in the yard but were taken by some nonetheless. One afternoon J.C. came on a heater boy boiling up an illicit billy-can for the rivet squad. 'Whose tea is that?' he thundered. The terrified lad replied 'Lipton's, Sir' - and no more was said!

Conditions of work at the yard were hard.' One first impression of the yard that was probably shared by many was that 'it was cold and wet and I detested it. The family relied on the wage though'.¹² Another man related how his father's brief career as a holder-on came to an end when he fell down a chain-lock on the Bay Rupert and was taken home unconscious. He never went back to the yard. He hadn't been too happy, confined up and inside masts, holding on rivets, while he had found the noise tremendous.¹³ Generally, noise was an occupational hazard of work in shipyards. The hazards of repairing rat-infested ships were also mentioned. Sometimes one man would be employed in simply knocking boards to keep the rats away.¹⁴ Apprentices, in particular, could be asked to do very dangerous things. One apprentice burner was sent to the top of a 150 ft. crane to do a piece of work. A shipyard rhyme given to us caricatures the sometimes hapless plight of apprentices:-

'It was a dark and stormy night -
The squad was working late.
The Gaffer sent the 'puir wee soul'
For a bag of 'inch and eight'.
He walked along the main deck
And stepped on the end of a plank
And thereby died a gallant death
Upon a ballast tank.' 15

We were told how boys were taken on in the yard:-

'Apprenticeships were won through application. There was a waiting list and no preferences were given. However, Bob was one of nine of a family and seven worked in the shipyards. It might be compared with mining with son following father down the pits while Ardrossan Harbour Company is similar'.¹⁶

The apprentice rates were generally poor although some were higher than others. In 1915 the starting salary for a

a boy serving a six year apprenticeship as a millwright was 5/- a week, of which 5d. was due to the sickness and accident fund and insurance. His salary rose to 10/- a week by his last year. Some earlier engineering apprentices had had starting salaries as low as 2/6d. per week. The starting salary for an apprentice sheet metal worker was 10/- a week which rose to 1 guinea a week in the sixth and final year. The starting salary for a time-served plumber was £3. 1.10. as compared with the going rate of £2.15. 0. for a time-served millwright. The apprentice shipwrights got 6/1d. for a 47 hour week in 1927 while an apprentice burner at the same time got 13/- a week.

The 1920's saw the gradual erosion of indenture of apprentices to the yard. By the 1930's the shipyard apprentices were not indentured. A high value was placed on having served an apprenticeship at the Ardrossan yard, however. It was claimed that Ardrossan men could - and did - work anywhere in the world afterwards. Yet there were some tensions between apprentices and journeymen. It was often felt that too many apprentices were taken on - as cheap labour - while there were sometimes difficulties in training. Some journeymen refused to work alongside apprentices lest they be blamed for the boy's mistakes.¹⁷

The following is a list of workers employed at the yard during the 1920's, including staff and labourers along with the tradesmen:-

Angle

/

Angle iron-smiths
Blacksmiths
Boilermakers
Burners
Caulkers
Chargehands
Coppersmiths
Cranemen
Detective
Draughtsmen
Drillers
Electricians
Engineers
Fitters
Foremen
French polishers
Hammermen
Holders-on
Inspectors
Insulators
Joiners
Laggers
Loftsmen

Managers
Millwrights
Nurse
Office staff
Packers
Painters
Patternmakers
Platers
Platers' helpers
Plumbers
Red leaders
Riggers
Riveters
Rivet heaters
Sailmakers
Saw doctor
Sheet metal workers
Shipwrights
Shipyard staggers
Timekeepers
Tilers
Tinsmiths

18

By the end of the Second World War the list of shipyard trades was much shorter. The saw doctor was no longer a specialist; the coppersmith had disappeared; the millwrights had been absorbed into the engineering department while the sheet metal workers were replaced by sheet iron workers. Steel fabrication ousted the patternmakers while riveting skills were supplanted by welders. Not all of the workers on the list were shipyard employees. For instance, plumbing, patternmaking or finishing trades like tiling and french polishing might be contracted-out.

Fear of unemployment and competition for work made demarcation an issue at Ardrossan in the 1920's although it was observed that it was pushed hardest by men from outside Ardrossan with experience of work on Upper Clyde shipyards. Men working in the yards during the '20s recall demarcation disputes, something not noted by men working in the yard later on or

or recorded earlier. Attitudes towards demarcation were complex. Some men, with hindsight, held that demarcation hastened the decline of shipbuilding, giving instances of delay created by demarcation, for instance, in the installation of ballast pipes. The pipes were normally of cast iron up to the bulkheads but the offset had to be made of copper. Thus the plumber put in the pipes. He took the set to the coppersmith who bent it while a fitter eventually joined up the link. Another view, however, was that trade divisions were perpetuated as much by management as by the men and that the original craft tag was a guarantee of craftsmanship.¹⁹

The unions apparently had the strength to draw up lines of demarcation. Otherwise their sphere of influence was limited. The Boilermaker's Union remained the most dominant union, operating a closed shop and representing the elite of the black squad. The level of the riveters' wages were shrouded in secrecy and speculation but while the Boilermakers could secure good rates for their craftsmen they could do nothing to resist pay-offs. Other trade unions were very much weaker while large numbers of semi-skilled men and labourers remained non-unionised. Insecurity of employment was the norm as men were hired to work on an order and paid off when it was completed. As in the past Ardrossan's wage rate followed that of the Upper Clyde minus a 1/- or 6d. cost of living differential. However, Ardrossan appeared to be less isolated from disputes affecting the Upper Clyde yards than previously while workers at the yard struck work for 7-10 days during the General Strike. Apprentices continued to work at the yard during the General Strike. However, intervention by the Boilermaker's Union ensured that

that little work was done by the apprentices while the strike was on and bad feeling rankled on between journeymen and apprentices after its collapse.²⁰

Another area which underlines union weakness was that of compensation for accidents at work. The shipyard operated a sick pay scheme under which a journeyman had 4d. per week and an apprentice 2d. per week deducted from wages. This paid out 9/- per week sickness benefit to an apprentice and 18/- per week to an adult. A further 9/- per week was paid out to those who contributed to the friendly society. However, the position relating to injury at work was that the company did not give sick pay but instead gave compensation for injury.

Compensation more often than not had to be wrested from the company after prolonged negotiations. The Boilermaker's Union took up a compensation battle for a furnaceman who lost an eye while working at his furnace. Compensation was £150. A painter at the yard suffered an ankle injury which left him lame for life after falling from an improperly placed ladder. He was unable to work for 5 years and received compensation only after some difficulties.²¹

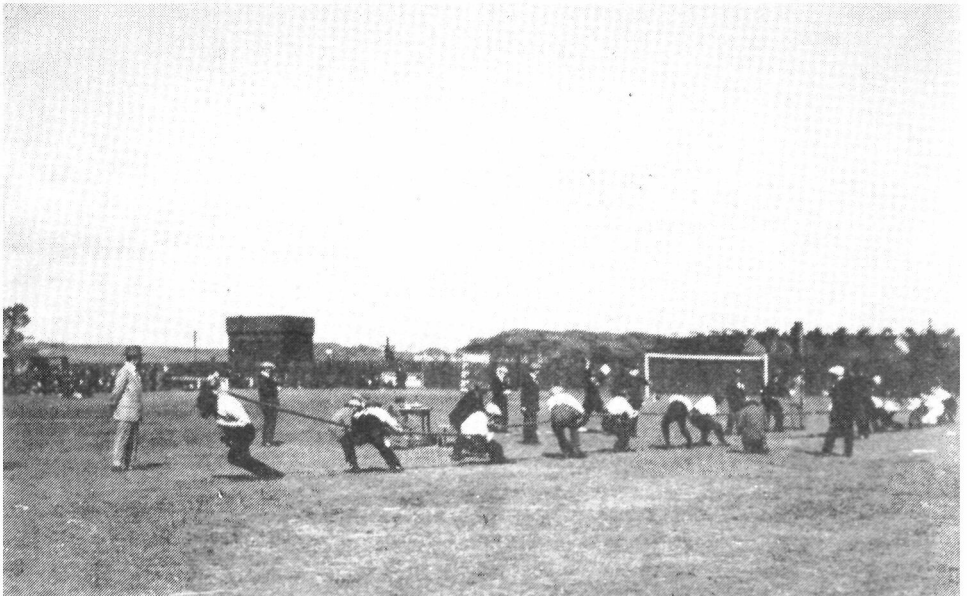
Compensation for injury was important as after all the shipyard was a dangerous place, although it was not considered any more dangerous than any other yard. The Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald carries several reports of injury at the yard. Six lives were lost in a tragic incident in 1916. Labourers discharging the grain cargo of the Norwegian ship, ss. Hjortnes, which had run aground south of the harbour were suffocated by



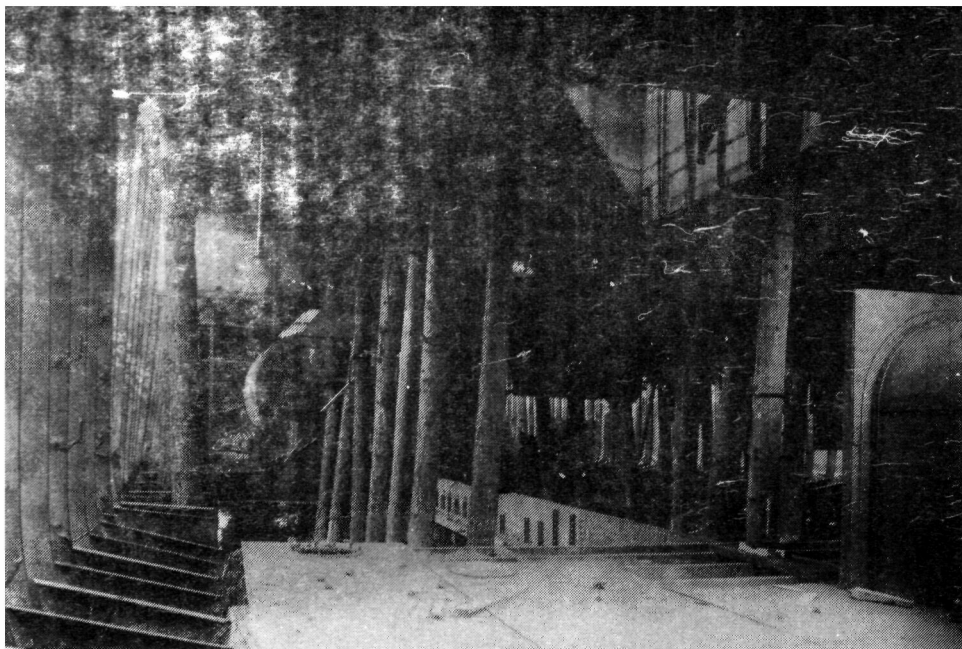
ARDROSSAN
D D & SONS LTD
PLUMBERS
SHEET IRON DEPT.



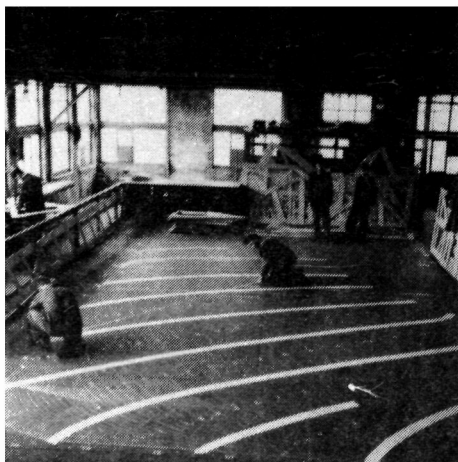
Wash up, Welfare Boys Club, Whiting Bay, July 1919



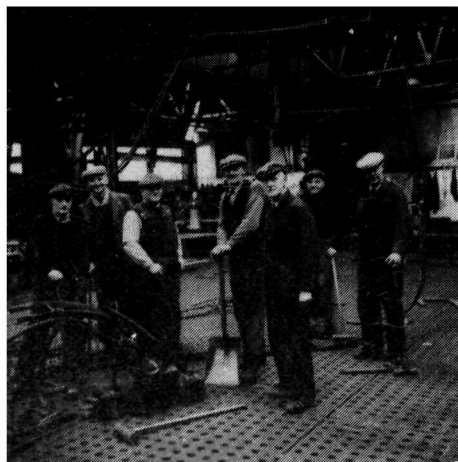
Tug-of-war, Shipyard sports, Winton Park, 1920's



After hold/bunkers of cargo ship in Dry Dock for repairs, (n.d.)



Mould-loft, Old Yard, Post Second World War



Frame-setters, Old Yard, Post Second World War



by gas fumes arising from the water-sodden grain.²² The opening of the New Yard, however, introduced medical facilities into the yard; two nurses were employed while the yard had its own ambulance.²³

For all the hardships of shipyard employment a good deal of pride was taken in the ships launched by the yard. Several companies were closely associated with Ardrossan during the 1920's. One was Hogarth's, a shipping firm developed by local man, Hugh Hogarth, into the Baron line. Another was the Hudson Bay Co. which based its fleet of Arctic supply vessels at Ardrossan from 1922 until 1933 when the Canadian Government brought pressure on the company to use Canadian ports. The first ship to be built for the Hudson Bay Co. was the Bayeskimo launched in 1922. Others were the Nascopie, the Baychimo, the Bayrupert and the Baynain.²⁴

Of these ships the Baychimo has acquired notoriety. She was abandoned by her crew in October 1931 as the Polar Pack closed in on the ship at the height of an Arctic storm. However, instead of being crushed by the ice, the Baychimo vanished. Since then it has been sighted at least fifty times.²⁵ The Deido also made shipbuilding history as Sea Breezes relates:-

'What was probably one of the most incredible launchings in the annals of shipbuilding took place in Ardrossan on the Firth of Clyde. In short, this arose from complications attached to the launching of the African Steam Ship Co.'s motorship Deido in the early winter of 1928.'²⁶

The problem was that at the launch the Deido refused to go, edging to the water at a speed of only 1/8th of an inch every

every few minutes while the tide receded. It took three days and three attempts to get the Deido to the tide in time!

The last ship built at the New Yard was the Mary Kingsley, also for the African Steam Ship Co., launched in September 1930. In November 1930 came the devastating announcement that the New Yard was to be dismantled as part of the rationalisation programme mounted by British Shipbuilding Security Ltd. (B.S.S.). The Glasgow Herald defended the B.S.S.:-

'Unfortunately, there is considerable misapprehension as to the necessary function of that concern. The belief is fairly widespread that B.S.S. is out to reduce shipbuilding capacity, and that it decides suddenly to close this yard or that yard without giving the owners any option in the matter. Both of these impressions are fundamentally wrong. The essential object of the new company - which is exclusively a shipbuilder's concern - is to assist the industry and to enable it to tackle the ever-growing problem of foreign competition ... Quite apart from the activities of B.S.S., about ten British shipyards have already closed down this year, owing to the industrial depression, and at present there are twenty British shipyards which are to all intents and purposes closed ...

... In brief, B.S.S. is an emergency institution which has been formed to avert what would almost certainly have been a British industrial tragedy. No argument is necessary to prove the soundness of the scheme when it is observed that associated with it are some of the greatest figures in British shipbuilding'

The Herald acknowledged the New Yard to be 'one of the best equipped yards on the Clyde' but added that the yard had been operating below capacity since 1922, launching 18 vessels amounting to 50,000 tons from 1923 to 1930 although it had a maximum annual output of 40,000 tons.²⁷

In Ardrossan things were seen differently. There was no local doubt that B.S.S. was out to reduce shipbuilding capacity and no comfort was derived from its membership. The view was

was that the hand of Sir James Lithgow, a leading member of B.S.S., lay behind the closure of Ardrossan yard which as a well-equipped yard with unlimited launching into the Firth of Clyde posed a distinct thread to Lithgow's own Upper Clyde yards.

Nothing was done to resist the closure. The unions were unable to act. Questions were raised in parliament. Lieut.-Col. Moore, Unionist MP for Ayr Burghs, asked the President of the Board of Trade what provision, if any, was being made for workers losing employment through rationalisation. George Buchanan, Labour MP for Gorbals, demanded to know if the government would prevent B.S.S. from taking similar action elsewhere 'and thus rendering certain districts derelict and almost hopeless'. The minister on both counts insisted that his department had no powers to intervene.²⁸ Thus the New Yard's short span of existence ended. Although there was no formal resistance the closure left much bitterness behind it. After 1930 shipbuilding in Ardrossan was confined to the Old Yard.

CHAPTER 3

Changed days, 1930-1969

The closure of the New Yard dealt a terrible blow to Ardrossan. Paid-off men had a great deal of difficulty in finding work. Numbers of men remained unemployed for at least 18 months while one man was unemployed for eight years after the closure. Many men left Ardrossan to look for work but most were not so fortunate as the left-handed riveter. This man joined a queue of men seeking work in the Glasgow yards. When his turn came, he was asked what he did and his answer produced shouts of delight and 'Come in, come in!' This man's story is quite unusual partly because he found work easily but also because he was looking for work alone. Riveters were usually employed in squads of four.

The closure of the New Yard considerably reduced Ardrossan's shipbuilding capacity. Ships of up to about 9,000 tons could have been built at the New Yard. Because of the limited launching space in the Old Dock tonnage was restricted to between 2,000 and 2,300 tons and length to 275 feet.¹

By 1934 business was picking up again in the Old Yard. The shipbuilding firm had had a change of title to the Ardrossan Dockyard Ltd. in 1926 when Elder Dempster sold out their interest in the concern, and J.G. Kincaid of Greenock joined Coast Lines Ltd. as controllers of the firm.² The change of title brought little change in industrial relations at the yard. Working conditions were found far from satisfactory. The shipwrights were transferred from a time rate to piece work which slashed

slashed take-home pay. The following extract from an interview reflects this grievance:-

'I was paid off at 18 ... in 1930 ... which interrupted my apprenticeship but I was taken on again in the repair yard in 1932. About ten apprentices were taken on then with a foreman - in my opinion, to be used as cheap labour in building dumb barges for a Dublin company. We were promised a bonus when the order was completed but received nothing.

At this stage I was a member of the Amalgamated Society of Shipwrights. It was a weak trade union and made no protest when the huge pay-offs were made in 1930.

In 1934-5 the Bandon, an Irish ship, was being fitted out in the yards. The top line was supposed to be £2.17. 0. No-one made anything like that. For skilled men it was slave labour at 30/- per week. One man, the union delegate, Dan Shields, objected. At the end of the contract, he was paid off and never worked in the Ardrossan yard again. The shipwrights were afraid for themselves and so there was no back-up for Dan ... By 1934 things were picking up ... 3-4 ships were being built a year mainly due to the defence build-up.'³

As the yard became busier a number of attempts were made to improve pay and conditions. Among the most successful was the apprentices' strike in April 1937. This strike lasted for a month and involved all shipyard apprentices on the Clyde. The strike settlement raised the apprentice rate by around 65% - an apprentice plumber's rate went up from 12/6d. per week to £1. 0. 6.⁴ However, other trade union demands were unsuccessful:-

'One of the changes that took place in the yard during the war was the advent of increased trade union militancy ... The shipwrights protested more but it didn't do much good because the answer was that there was a war on. In 1942 I was working as a liner-off but not being paid the rate for the job so I protested. Thus I was branded an agitator. I was transferred to Stephen's yard on the Clyde along with five others. The other five had no complaints but to use a shipyard expression 'their faces didn't fit'. The management in Stephen's had been told that we were all agitators. After six weeks they sent word to Ardrossan that if these men were agitators and poor tradesmen they would like to see what their first-class craftsmen were like!'⁵

During /

During the 1939-1945 war the yard became véry busy employing up to 700 men. Over the war years 25 new ships were built:- 11 mine-sweeping trawlers, 5 boom defence ships and 2 cargo ships for the Ministry of War Transport and 7 cargo ships for private owners. A good deal of repair work was also done. Forty-nine submarines, 31 destroyers, 10 frigates and 8 corvettes were repaired apart from 359 Admiralty ships and 288 merchant ships.⁶ It was claimed that you could have walked across Ardrossan harbour during the war from one ship to another.⁷

The yard remained busy up to the mid-1950's, according to Bill McCrindle, 'thanks to Marshall Plan money and the need to replace lost tonnage'.⁸ Pride in the craft tradition prevailed in the yard and many men remember the luxurious fittings, and in particular, a beautiful inlaid wood picture made for the Portuguese West African ship, the Zambezi. Many local men also remembered working on an order for the Guinness firm, the Lady Gwendolen.⁹ Launch days were important as ever and the Guinness boat brought a special order:-

'A mixture of half-champagne and half-Guinness was requested for the launch of the Guinness boat and was duly prepared. A member of the Guinness family launched the boat. She was anxious whether or not the bottle would break. There was no need to worry as it literally exploded on impact leaving the yard with the problem that all that remained was the rope and there was nothing to present to her!'¹⁰

However, from 1955 onwards the work force began to shrink dramatically. Bill McCrindle recalls that about 600-650 men were employed at the yard when he started work as an apprentice fitter in 1955. 'By 1960 there was only 150 men and a good deal of repair work rather than new building'.¹¹ In 1959 the

the yard had only seven barges and a trawler on the order book.

The Scotsman drew attention to the yard's dilemma in 1959.

J.C., still in harness as managing director, gave his views:-

'The gravest fall has been in the past year. In May 1958 we had 450 men and now it is down to 189. The coastal trade has been hit by road transport and we have suffered as a result. We have also felt foreign competition very keenly - in fact, we find it nearly impossible to compete with shipbuilders in Germany, Italy, Japan ...

... I can tell the reason, too. Out there they don't have the demarcations we have between working trades. I am not talking about wages - they have increased greatly, but that isn't a bad thing - but the numbers of men we have got to employ. If we hadn't got that order for barges this yard would have been closed. Now there is another order for a trawler but one boat like that will never keep this yard going. It is a tragedy, because the men we have are really good'.¹²

Another indicator of the yard's difficulties was its continued failure to renew equipment. To illustrate how old some of the equipment in use was when the pump used to empty out the water from the Dry Dock became unserviceable no spare parts were obtainable anywhere in the country and a new pump had to be bought.¹³ A typical comment from the 1950's was 'Everything in the yard had to be literally manhandled at this stage and some equipment seemed to be held together with string'.¹⁴ There was pre-First World War equipment in use in the yard. On one occasion J.C. flew into a rage when the sailing of a ship in for repairs was held up for the want of a $\frac{3}{8}$ " tapping drill. 'A $\frac{3}{8}$ " tapping drill! There was one here when I came here!'¹⁵ This story reflects how little the yard had done to renew equipment.

There were other signs of decline. Young men tended to move on after serving their apprenticeships. Some had no

no option as they were paid off. A good many old men were employed at the yard. Men aged over 70 worked on in the yard so long as they were able. There was no pension scheme for shipyard employees, a factor that persuaded some younger men to move elsewhere.¹⁶

The obvious decline of the shipyard by 1960 was a source of anxiety to management and men and to the town itself. The Scotsman gave the yard's problems headlines, 'Ardrossan recalls its palmy days - Little hope of expansion now' :-

'The spirit of the town has changed out of all recognition from those earlier days. The Clyde has opened its all-embracing arms, trade has drifted away, even the dockyard is hanging on to existence by the skin of its teeth.

There is a drabness and flatness about the very air ... Men lounge at street corners, sure sign of an unemployed dockland. They look resigned, as if the future had not much to offer.'¹⁷

By 1962 there were widespread rumours that the yard was to be closed down as the workforce and order book steadily diminished. In January 1962 the Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald reported that the yard was not to be closed but to be put up for sale as a going concern. It was pointed out, however, that more redundancy would be caused by the decision that no new construction work was to be undertaken.¹⁸ In May 1962 the takeover by Archie Kelly came as a great relief. Kelly was a Greenock man, a former ship's chief engineer and a 'self-made' man. He took on the yard with the intention of running it as a ship repair yard and as an extension of his sugar machinery manufacturing business in Greenock.¹⁹ The yard then had a workforce of 146 with enough work on hand to keep them busy for six weeks. Kelly kept his

his options open on his plans for the yard. The Glasgow Herald reported that while he could not guarantee that there would be no redundancy he did not rule out the possibility of building new ships if the opportunity presented itself in the future.²⁰

By June the Ardrossan yard was competing for tenders to build small ships and the local MP, Sir Fitzroy MacLean, was involved in attempting to press the yard's claims to Admiralty work. By August 1963 optimistic forecasts for the yard's future were appearing in the press:-²¹

'£40,000 Plan to improve Dockyard
500 may find employment

Ardrossan Dockyard Ltd., contrary to the present trend in the shipbuilding and ship-repairing industry have undertaken a £40,000 scheme of improvement, and have plans to put the yard back into the shipbuilding business, with the prospect of providing work for 500 men.'²²

The optimism continued throughout 1963.²³ By December the yard had enough building and repair work to employ 180-200 men. Kelly was reported as saying:-

'We are making good progress now, and the prospects for 1964 are good. We have obtained Admiralty as well as merchant ship repair work, and have an oil bunkering barge under construction. The value of the work now in hand is estimated at about £200,000.'²⁴

In keeping with this mood of optimism Kelly won approval when he lifted the rates of the lowest paid workers, the labourers, by 6d. an hour, and paid the shipwrights higher rates.²⁵ However, the fitter's department was a bone of contention. There were six different engineering managers

managers within the space of two years. One of these was Bill McCrindle who thought that he had succeeded in interesting Kelly in his brand of industrial relations but found otherwise. McCrindle was paid off after only six weeks and afterwards took steps to set up his own business in Ardrossan.

Ardrossan Dockyard Ltd. dropped out of the news in 1964. It closed down in 1969 but its closure did not merit a line in the Glasgow Herald then preoccupied with the Upper Clyde shipbuilding news. Even the local paper showed little interest.

Between 1964 and 1969 Archie Kelly had shown considerable interest in buying other shipyards. He bought the Liffy Dockyard in Dublin²⁶ in 1968 and made unsuccessful bids for the Ailsa Shipyard, Troon, and for Upper Clyde yards. These activities won him the nickname of 'Cash-down Kelly'. It is impossible to say with certainty what place the Ardrossan yard occupied in this scheme of things.

In 1969 the yard's fate was sealed when it became enmeshed with the desire of the Harbour Company (since 1966 a subsidiary company of the Clyde Port Authority) to acquire shipyard land to provide roll-on-roll-off facilities for the new Arran car ferry. The Harbour Company's records suggest that they did not consider themselves to be negotiating with Kelly on the basis of forcing him out of business. The Harbour Company was not in a position to do this as Kelly's lease of the shipyard had about seventy years to run.²⁷ In October 1969 in return for an agreed sum Kelly gave up all but one of his leases to

to the shipyard. The remaining lease was for 3,320 square yards on the South West of the harbour. This theoretically left open the option of minor ship-repairing or related industry. The option was not taken up and the lease was sold to the Harbour Company in 1975.

Thus, in 1969 shipbuilding in Ardrossan was apparently at an end after 144 years in business. As when the New Yard closed in 1930 there was no attempt to mount a campaign of protest. Far more concern and attention was given to the yard's fate over 1959-1962 than in either 1930 or 1969. Nonetheless the closure of the yard took most of its workers by surprise although a few had seen the writing on the walls. Apart from the question-mark over Kelly's intentions the physical condition of the Old Yard was deteriorating. The dock wall at the lock gates was collapsing and there were difficulties in lowering the gates for the last ships. Jim Platts reckoned the repair bill could have come to £1,000,000.²⁸ Such repairs would have demanded massive commitment to shipbuilding at the Old Yard in Ardrossan. In 1969 that commitment was absent. The Old Yard closed leaving behind it a mixed heritage:- one that had many positive elements arising out of wry humour and pride in a craft tradition yet shot through with suppressed bitterness.

POSTSCRIPT

There is a postscript as despite all the indications to the contrary shipbuilding in Ardrossan did not entirely end in 1969. The renewal of shipbuilding emerged from the development of the successful engineering business set up by Bill McCrindle on his parting company with Archie Kelly in 1965. McCrindle had developed his views on man management through trade union involvement and the combination of shipbuilding and conventional construction experience. He had promised Archie Kelly that he would make Ardrossan Dockyard the Japanese shipyard of Great Britain. That came to naught when their relationship did not work out and McCrindle was prompted to start his own business.

While in America in 1972 to sell his services direct to the American oil companies becoming active in the North Sea oil industry, McCrindle met Mr. Roy Bandy, of Luling, Texas, who became his American agent. After learning the details of McCrindle's career Bandy asked if he would like to re-open the shipyard in Ardrossan. Bandy explained that he had close friends who ran a small shipyard on the Gulf Coast of Texas, employing about 300 men and building work boats for the off-shore oil industry. Their order book now extended beyond two years. It seemed to Bandy that they might be interested in associating with a Scottish yard to build work boats for the North Sea oil industry especially for some American clients who could not wait for a two year delivery period. This conversation planted the seeds of the idea.

On /

On his return from America McCrindle started negotiations to acquire 10 acres of the ground that had formed the New Yard, now owned by Shell, and the 3 adjoining acres of the old yard owned by the Ardrossan Harbour Company. With the support of the local MP Fitzroy Maclean, McCrindle succeeded in acquiring the land and obtaining permission from British Shipbuilding Securities Ltd. to build ships on the New Yard site. McCrindle invested a quarter of a million pounds in the yard between 1972 and 1974 and in 1973 won an order to build a car ferry for Highland Regional Council. The Kylesku Ferry was launched from the New Yard in September 1975. However, no fresh orders followed as McCrindle explained:-

'Unfortunately following the launch of the first ship from my new yard the shipbuilding industry collapsed drastically due to the four-fold increase in the price of oil. The new shipyard was therefore put on a care and maintenance basis.'

From 1975 to 1983 the McCrindle group developed and expanded its engineering interests. In the summer of 1982, however, McCrindle and his directors sensed that there may be new scope for their shipyard with the demise of so many small yards. The company began actively seeking orders and in October 1983 won a contract to build two small ferries for Strathclyde Regional Council to replace the existing Renfrew Ferry. The value of the contract for the two ships is £468,000 and the order will employ 25 men on average. The boats are to be built entirely under cover, partly at McCrindle's factory at Dalry Road, Ardrossan, and finished off at the Inches. On completion, due in summer 1984, the boats will be lowered into the water by crane. McCrindle's company is actively seeking further orders for ships and hopes that there is a future for shipbuilding in Ardrossan:-

'In /

'In November 1983 there are only four small shipyards left in Scotland capable and or interested in manufacturing vessels of this size (50 tons gross). Given that the orders are obtainable it is the McCrindle group's intention to develop the yard hopefully back to its original capacity.'

We can only guess at what the future may hold for shipbuilding in Ardrossan. It is welcome, however, to be left guessing.

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A. & S.H. - Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald

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- 2 op. cit., p.281
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- 8 Interview with Willie Morrison
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- 10 Interview with Jim Platts
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- 12 Interview with Jim Platts
- 13 Interview with Willie Paxton
- 14 Interview with Bob Flinn and Jimmy Smith
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- 16 Interviews with Bob Flinn and Jimmy Smith
- 17 Information on apprentice rates and training collated from all above interviews.
- 18 List arrived at after long discussion in Workshop and lists supplied by Bob Flinn, Jim Platts and Richmond Wilson
- 19 Workshop discussion, 5 May 1983
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- 21 Workshop discussions, 2-23 February 1983
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- 1 Scotsman, 27 October 1957
- 2 A. & S.H., 9 February 1962

- 3 Interview with Jim Platts
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John Hayton, engineer, 1940-51, minus Navy service
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Ernest Bernthal, plumber, 1934-62
James Tomelty, painter's assistant, 1915-18
James Steel, plater's boy, 1926- ?
Thomas McLean, engineer, 1941-61
Willie Wilson, accountant, 1915-69
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Jimmy Smith, millwright, 1915- ?
Sam Morrison, office, 1951-4 and briefly 1957
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Andrew Wilson, loftsman, 1935-c.1960
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APPENDIX

Thomas MacLean chose to write down his memories of work at Ardrossan shipyard:-

I joined the local shipyard as an apprentice engineer in 1941 and worked there off and on for the following twenty years till the early sixties. Ardrossan harbour area was requisitioned as a naval base - "H.M.S. Fortitude" - when the war started and the shipyard's priority became naval vessels, consisting of minesweepers, destroyers and submarines for drydocking and refitting. As well as repair work, new construction was also carried out, there being at least two vessels on the slips at any time. These could be merchant coasting vessels or armed trawlers for the Navy. The peak labour force during the war period was 600.

As one can imagine the shipyard was the main employer in Ardrossan and it was a sad day for the town when the yard closed in the late sixties. The yard was a major training ground for apprentices of all trades and literally hundreds of chief engineers and naval architects qualified after completing their time in the yard.

The yard was owned by "The Coast Lines" consortium which included Ardrossan Harbour, Burns Laird, David MacBrayne, David Kincaid and numerous others. Apart from the naval work which had priority the Burns Laird and Coast Line ships were the most frequent refits during the war years.

During my time in the yard I saw some great transitions in ships. When I started almost all the merchant ships were steam powered with reciprocating engines which were a joy to work on there being something humane and personal about them. At this time diesel powered vessels were few and far between and it was something of a novelty (albeit a dirty one) to work on a large diesel job. By the time I left marine work the reciprocating steam engine had virtually disappeared and the diesel was here to stay.

I also saw the transition from riveted vessels to all-welded construction. In my early days there were still some "Hand" riveting squads on the yard as well as the common machine riveting squads. It is interesting to remember the names of the various squad members. First there was the heater boy who heated the rivets to red heat; he could be anything up to seventy years of age. He threw the hot rivet to the "Pitter In" who did just that. The rivet was held in the hole by the "Haudey Oan" who had an amazing collection of anvil hammers to hold the rivet in sometimes the most inaccessible places, while the riveter hammered the rivet into the countersink of the plate on the other side. It was a fascinating sight to watch the old hand riveters of whom there would be two, hammering the rivet home with alternate blows and yet never to hit each other's hammers.

As /

As in all other yards, welding was introduced rather warily in hull construction as some American Liberty ships which were among the earliest all welded ships had broken their backs crossing the Atlantic during the war, this being found to be due to lack of knowledge of annealing the joint after welding to relieve the stresses set up. The first welded hulls in the yard only had the plate butts welded and the horizontal seams and frames riveted; however as techniques became known the all welded hull became accepted and by the sixties riveting had virtually become obsolete and so had the riveters.

A camaraderie existed in the yard between the workers that I and most other ex-workers have never met since although the actual working conditions were sometimes barbaric and welfare provisions were non-existent. On reflection, the accident rate was well below that of most modern establishments, ironically the fact that few safety precautions existed seemed to make everyone more aware for their own safety and consequently accidents were few and far between. The ambulance man was a strict disciplinarian called John Sim. John was a grand old chap. He was chief storekeeper. So the procedure when one injured oneself was to make one's way or be carried to the store to contact John who would then proceed to the first aid room with you. The kettle would be boiled and John would wash the wound and apply iodine in copious amounts without warning. Some said that if you fainted, John would give you a drink of iodine as this was his panacea.

I feel in reminiscing about the yard I must mention the toilets; they were a mediaeval arrangement whereby approximately twenty men could sit in a long platform with suitable holes in it, under which a common trough ran and was flushed periodically with water. A plank was fiendishly placed shoulder high so that you could not sit upright and read the noon Record. Mischievous apprentices would sometimes light a newspaper and send a "Fire Boat" along the trough when it flushed under twenty posteriors causing great anguish. Eventually some workman called the factory inspector who upon inspecting the loos, informed the management to humanise the toilets immediately or she would close the yard within 24 hours.

The characters who were among the workforce were legion not the least being the managing director "John Coleman" a 16 stone energetic Irishman who with his bowler hat on and dust coat flying, went through the yard every morning at starting time like a dose of "Epsom Salts". If you had a vantage point like a crane or a ship's bridge, the spectacle of J.C. shooting in one end of the plating shed or paint shop and dozens of workmen stampeding out the other was something to behold; no such thing as management starting at staff hours on J.C.'s book.

Another character worth mention was "Big Bob" the riveter. Bob's sole aim was to hammer in rivets on piecework and woe betide anyone who prevented him from doing so, but alas he lacked a certain measure of refinement. One day at the unofficial tea break Bob was boiling his black can on the rivet fire when "Puggy" (J. Muir under manager) caught him and said

said "Now Bob you know you're not allowed to drink tea". Bob replied "Youse huv tea in yur oaffice!", to which Puggy replied, "Yes but I take it for my health" (meaning he had a drink of liquid to help him swallow angina tablets). Whereupon Big Bob pushed his face into Puggy's and said "And dae ye think a take it tae poosin masel".

There were other characters too numerous to mention but it all made for a happy atmosphere despite the hardships which sometimes occurred.

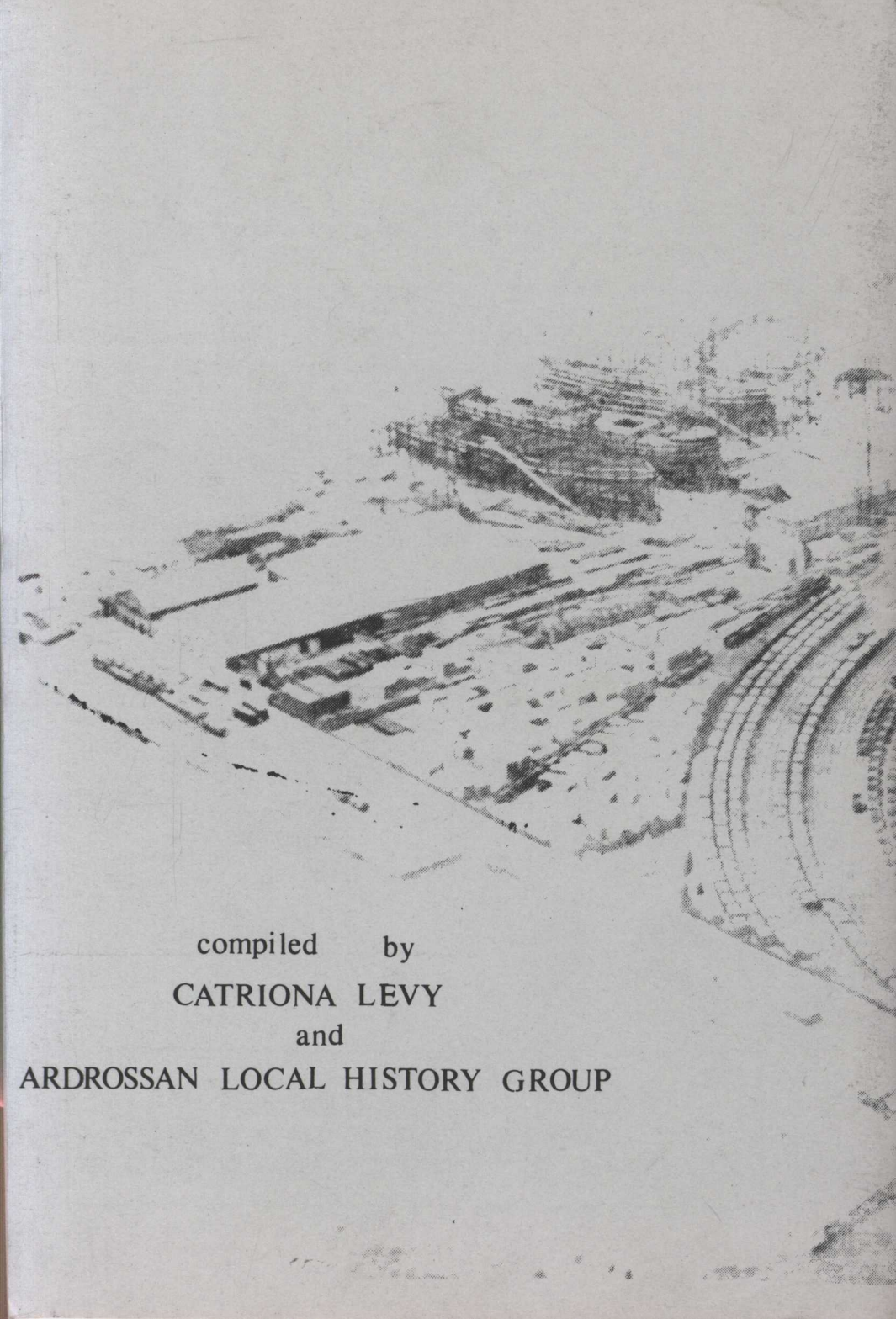
One aspect of the shipyard I didn't agree with was that in common with all yards the "Boilermakers", i.e. platers, riveters, caulkers, and welders, had a wage of 50% in excess of the finishing trades, i.e. engineers, plumbers, joiners, carpenters, painters; this situation was inherited from the era when a ship was just a shell and the internals were very simple and unsophisticated which didn't give the finishing trades much muscle. I would not detract from the skill of the "Boilermakers" but it did not outdo that of the finishing trades. This problem was resolved in the middle sixties when the shipyards of this country saw the writing on the wall and tried to re-equip and modernise when among the other changes such as dropping many of the lines of demarcation, all tradesmen irrespective of union received the same wage. The classic example being in the days of demarcation when it took three different trades to fit a port light to a ship side or bulkhead and after reorganisation one tradesman performed this job.

However all these changes came too late and too little to revive the ailing shipyards and in the middle sixties "Coast Line" sold the Ardrossan yard to a Mr. Kelly who ran it in a minor capacity till about 1970 when it finally closed to the great loss of Ardrossan and district.

When looking at the filled-in basin it is hard to realise that one afternoon during the war it held five submarines, three destroyers and two merchant ships.

Thomas MacLean.

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