



Unloading mails from the American Line's SS *New York* at Plymouth, c1905  
Courtesy: Graham Brooks Collection

## England via Plymouth

Plymouth had an advantage over other UK ports because of its location at the western entrance to the English Channel. Passengers and mail could be disembarked, via Millbay Docks, and then quickly transported inland by train - saving the time spent at sea sailing on to places like Southampton or London. Millbay also offered the last chance to join a ship outbound from the Channel.

A large number of the world's greatest ocean going shipping companies established Plymouth calls. From the 1870s visiting mail and passenger steamers preferred not to dock at Millbay but, instead, anchored in the Sound - inside the Breakwater or at Cawsand Bay, depending on tide, weather and the size of ship. Passengers and mail were transported to and from the Docks by a fleet of tenders.

The number of regular callers grew steadily - helped, in the early 1900s, by the American Line, White Star, Cunard and others moving their North Atlantic liners from Liverpool to Southampton to capture the growing traffic in continental passengers. The liner traffic peaked in the 1930s and declined after the War. The departure of the French Line's *Liberté* in November 1961 marked the end of an era, although occasional cruise liners still continue to call.

## Dockside

### Gateway to the World

By the mid-1880s ships belonging to many famous British and international shipping lines called at Plymouth, operating routes world wide - across the North Atlantic, serving the West Indies, sailing to West and South Africa and voyaging further east to India, Australia, New Zealand and China.

Callers included:

Aberdeen Line, Australian Line, British & African, British & Colonial, British India Line, Castle/Colonial Lines, Direct Line, French Line, Hamburg America, Holt Line, Monarch Line, New Zealand Steamship Company, Oceanic Steam Navigation, Orient Line, Peninsula & Oriental, Pacific Steam Navigation, Queensland Royal Mail Line, Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, Shaw Savill & Albion, South African Line, Union Line, West African Line.

### VIPs & Celebrities

Lots and lots of famous people - including politicians, soldiers, writers and stars of the stage and screen - embarked or, more usually, disembarked from liners at Millbay, Plymouth. Here are just a few names:

General Allenby, Charlie Chaplin, Maurice Chevalier, Winston Churchill, Clemenceau, Bebe Daniels, Marlene Dietrich, Walt Disney, Douglas Fairbanks, Helen Keller, John F Kennedy, Pierre Laval, Vivian Leigh, Lloyd George, Ben Lyon, Anna Pavlova, General Pershing, Mary Pickford, Cecil Rhodes, Bernard Shaw, General Smuts, HG Wells.

### Transatlantic Liners

Many famous steam ships and liners have called at Plymouth, including the *PS Sirius* (1838) and Brunel's *SS Great Britain* (1845). The ill-fated *Titanic* was due at Plymouth on her return crossing from New York but sank on her maiden voyage.

**American Line** - *St Louis, St Paul, New York, Philadelphia* (ex-City of Paris)

**Cunard** - *Mauretania, Aquitania, Berengaria* (ex-Imperator), *Lancastria, Queen Mary*

**French Line** - *Paris, France(2), De Grasse, Ile de France, Normandie*

**Hamburg America** - *Deutschland, Amerika*

**Holland America** - *Rotterdam(4), Nieuw Amsterdam(1&2), Statendam(1&3)*

**North German Lloyd (NDL)** - *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse, Kronprinz Wilhelm, Columbus, Bremen, Europa*

**United States Line** - *America* (ex-Amerika), *Leviathan* (ex-Vaterland), *George Washington* (ex-NDL), *Manhattan, Washington*

**White Star** - *Teutonic, Adriatic, Oceanic, Majestic, Olympic, Majestic* (ex-Bismarck), *Britannic*



The survey ship *Oithona*, a converted steam yacht, in the Inner Basin, 1902  
Used as a survey vessel by the Marine Biological Association, Plymouth. Note the timber stockpiled on the quayside.

Courtesy: Marine Biological Association, Plymouth



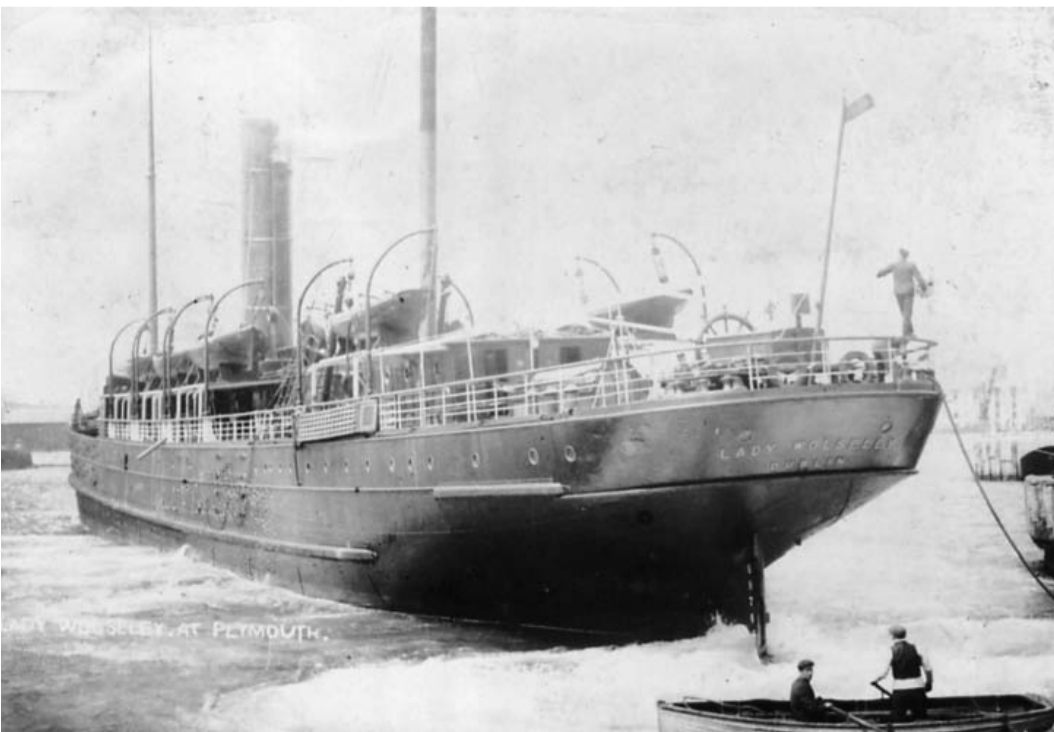
The SS *Sagamore* at the West Wharf, c1912  
An unusual 'turtle decked' vessel.

Courtesy: Bob Cook Collection



Shipping and boats in the Inner Basin at Millbay, c1905  
The yacht is possibly *Galatea* - which raced for the America's Cup and lost to *Mayflower* in 1886; she was moored at Millbay for many years and home to its owner Mrs Henn.

Courtesy: The Fisher Collection



British & Irish steamer *Lady Wolseley* in the Outer Basin, Millbay, c1908

Courtesy: The Fisher Collection



Yachts in the Inner Basin before a Single-handed Transatlantic Race  
The Plymouth based race began in 1960 and takes place every four years.

Photograph Roy Westlake: Plymouth Library Services



NERC ships *Discovery* (2) and *Discovery* (3) in the Inner Basin, 1963  
*Discovery* (1929) is in 'North Atlantic' colours'. *Discovery* (1962) is in 'Tropical' white.  
 Courtesy: Marine Biological Association, Plymouth

## Other Shipping

Millbay was once home to official vessels belonging to the Board of Trade, HM Customs and the Port Health Authority; the Custom cutters would also call in. The Plymouth Lifeboat has operated from Millbay since 1862 - the modern vessel is stationed near Millbay Pier.

Before sailing to the Antarctic, Scott's ship *Discovery* and Shackleton's *Nimrod* and *Quest* visited Millbay. The Docks also became a base for ocean science survey vessels belonging to Plymouth's Marine Biological Association and, later, those operated by the National Environment Research Council.

From the 1870s the Great Western Railway and its successors used their tender fleet as trip boats, running excursion trips from Millbay along the coast or to the Eddystone. In the heyday of the paddle steamer other excursion vessels visited the Docks and ran trips east to Weymouth and west to Penzance.

## Dockside

### Lifeboats

In 1862 a lifeboat house and slipway was built on the western shore of Millbay for the pulling lifeboat *Prince Consort*. In 1880 the lifeboat was re-housed at the Camber, by the western entrance to the docks. The first motor lifeboat arrived in 1926. Since then, Plymouth's lifeboat has always been maintained afloat at Millbay - the latest boat on station is the *Sybil Mullen Glover* which arrived in 2003. The Lifeboat crew are now based in the octagonal Custom House - the oldest building in the Docks.



Plymouth Lifeboat *Escape*, April 1887  
 On the slipway at the Camber, Millbay.  
 Courtesy: RNLI (Plymouth) & Alan Salsbury



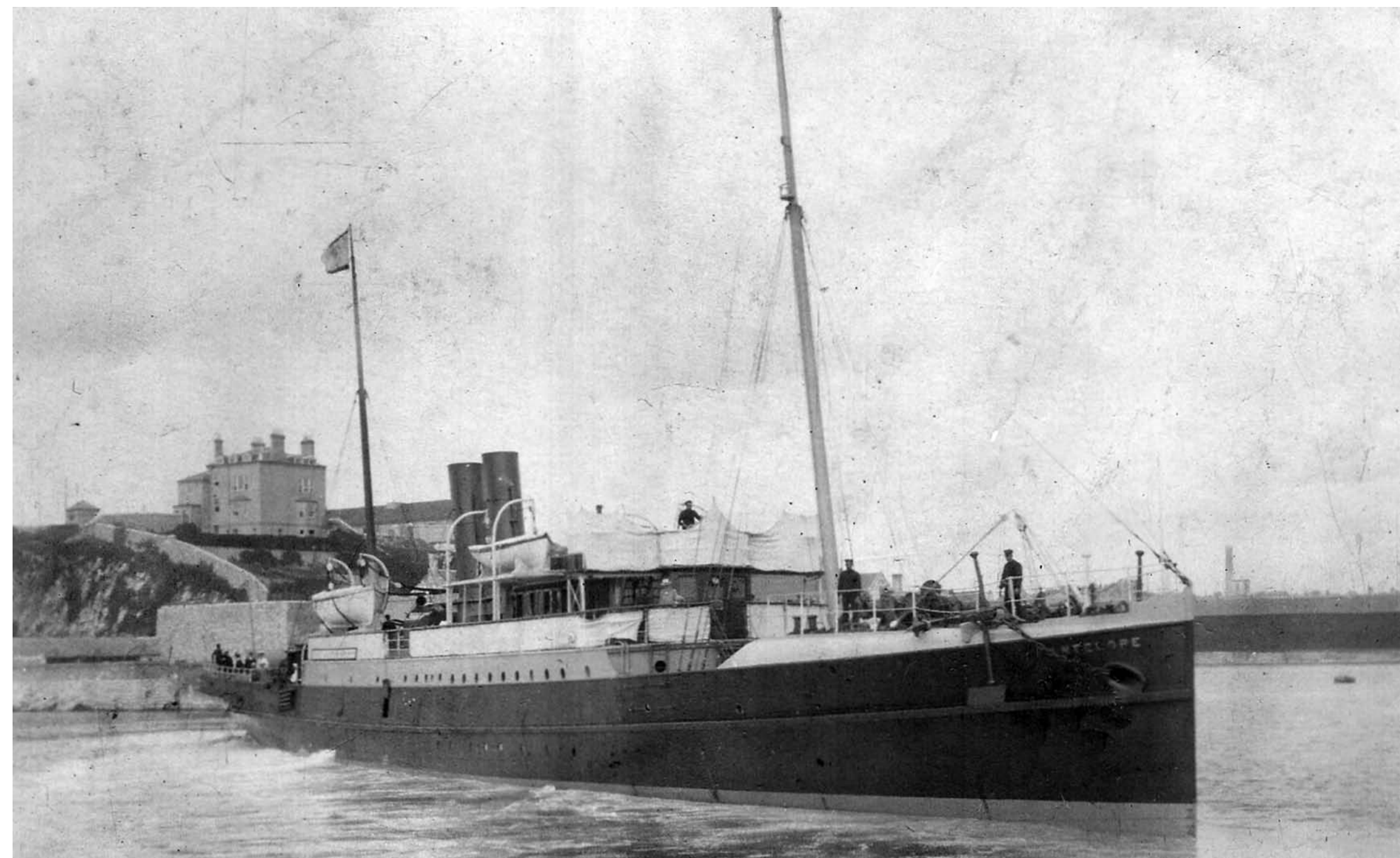
Lifeboat *Thomas Forehead* and *Mary Rowse*, 1974  
 Stationed at Millbay 1952-1974; pictured in Firestone Bay.  
 Courtesy: RNLI (Plymouth) & Alan Salsbury

### Port Health

Until about 1930 the Port Health Authority maintained a vessel to serve the isolation hospital ships that used to be anchored in Plymouth's Jennycliff Bay. This was also used to take a doctor to board incoming ships. The last vessel was withdrawn in 1981.

### Survey Ships

Research and survey vessels that used Millbay Docks included the ships *Oithona*, *Sarsia*, *Frederick Russell*, *John Murray*, *Challenger*, *Shackleton*, *Discovery* (2) and *Discovery* (3).



The former GWR cross-Channel steamer *Antelope* at Millbay, 1906  
 First used in Plymouth for tendering liners and excursion work. Later used for the cross-Channel trade.

Courtesy: The Fisher Collection



Group of children visit the Brittany Ferry *Armorique*, March 1976

Plymouth Library Services



The Brittany Ferry *Benodet* at the West Wharf, c1984

Plymouth Library Services

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*Kerisnel* on her first arrival at Plymouth, January 1973  
Plymouth Library Services

## Cross-Channel

Plymouth has long had trading links with France and Millbay Docks has always had a share. Between 1909 and 1912 the Great Western Railway ran cross-Channel cargo services to Brest and Nantes. In the early 1970s a group of French vegetable farmers restored these links.

Brittany Ferries was set-up to speed the delivery of fresh cauliflowers to Britain. A new harbour was built at Roscoff in West Brittany whilst, at Millbay, berthing dolphins were installed and land set aside for marshalling freight and future shore side developments. The first Ro-Ro ferry, the *Kerisnel*, arrived in Plymouth on 3 January 1973.

An additional route to St Malo was trialled from 1976-7 and the Plymouth to Santander in Spain service began in 1978. A new agreement saw a second Ro-Ro berth opened at Millbay in 1986. Today Brittany Ferries remain the focus of the Dock's shipping business. In 2006 the Plymouth ships carried some 555,000 passengers, 175,500 cars and 12,500 freight units.

## Dockside

### Plymouth to France with the GWR

In the early 1900s the GWR-owned, Weymouth-based, passenger steamers *Gazelle*, *Lynx* and *Antelope* could often be seen at Millbay, used for tender or excursion work. After 1907 and until 1912, more regular seasonal cargo and passenger services began from Plymouth or Weymouth to Nantes and Brest. *Gazelle* was converted for the trade and her sisters were later chartered to carry strawberries, peas and other vegetables from Brittany to Plymouth. The *Bretonne* briefly joined the fleet.

### Holidaymakers

Brittany Ferries was set up to ship freight, but it was soon clear that there was a growing demand from holidaymakers. More ships were purchased or chartered to serve the Plymouth routes. New central Channel crossings from Portsmouth and Poole were soon established.

### Via Millbay in 2006

*Plymouth / Roscoff / Plymouth:*

Passengers - 415,000; Cars - 130,000;  
Freight units - 8000

*Plymouth / Santander / Plymouth:*

Passengers - 150,000; Cars - 45,500;  
Freight units - 4500

### Brittany Ferries at Millbay

Brittany Ferries have owned or chartered many ships since 1972. Those listed here have sailed from Plymouth - either as a regular caller, covering for another ship or working several routes:

*Kerisnel* 1972-4

*Poseidon* 1973

*Penn-Ar-Bed* new build: 1974-84

*Prince de Bretagne* 1974-5

*Bonanza* 1976

*Armorique* 1976-94

*Cornouailles* new build: 1977-89

*Prince of Brittany* 1979-89

*Breizh-Izal* 1980-9

*Goelo* 1980-2

*Quiberon* 1982-2002

*Benodet* 1983-5

*Trégastel* 1985-91

*Duc De Normandie* 1986-2005

*Bretagne* new build: 1989-93

*Val de Loire* 1993-2006

*Pont Aven* new build: 2004-

*Pont L'Abbé* 2006-



*Pont Aven* departing Millbay, 2004

Courtesy NJO: PCMAG



*Titanic* departs Southampton Docks under tow, 10 April 1912

Southampton City Heritage



Crew survivors of the *Titanic* disaster arrive at Millbay Pier, April 1912  
Ferried from the liner *Lapland* by the GWR tender *Sir Richard Grenville*. Survivors were detained in the passenger waiting areas at Millbay while statements were collected.

Southampton City Heritage



*Titanic* stewardesses pictured at Millbay, April 1912

About 86 crew members had to stay overnight. The men slept in the passenger waiting rooms. The 20 stewardesses were put up in a nearby hotel.

Southampton City Heritage



The *Titanic* survivors at Millbay, April 1912

Friends, family, public and press waited eagerly outside the Docks. Over 80 seamen and firemen were 'released' at 1.30pm and allowed to talk to the press or visit the town.

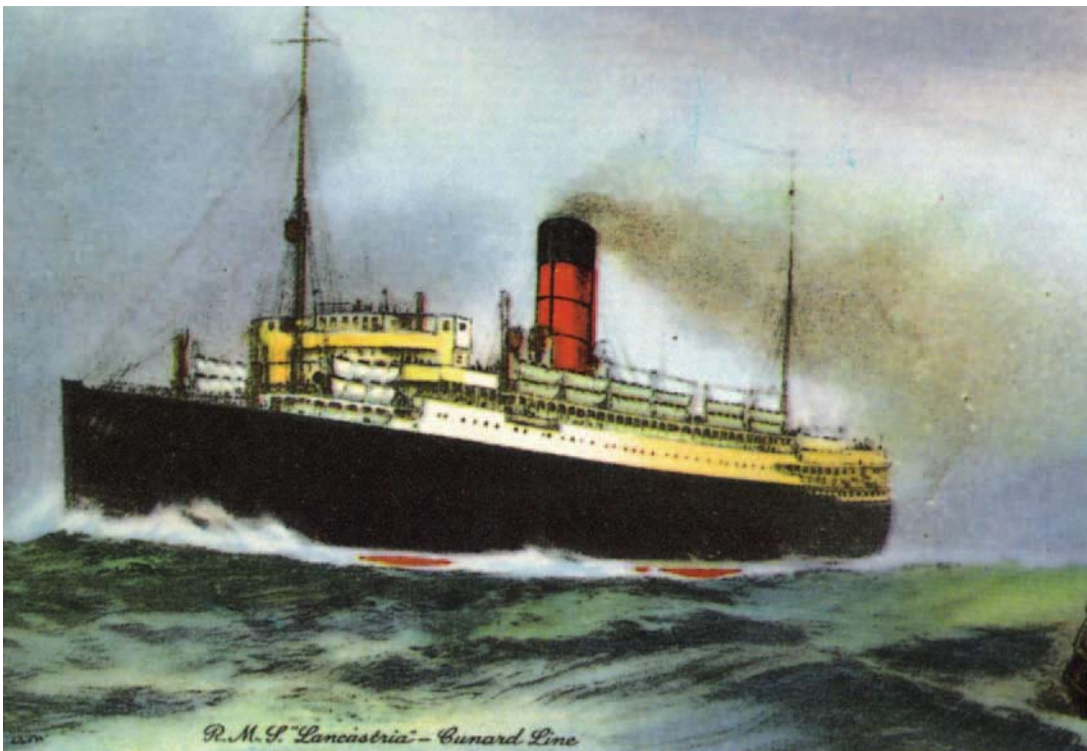
Southampton City Heritage



Group of male crew survivors from *Titanic* at Millbay Docks, April 1912

Bedding and food was provided for the men who had to stay overnight - including 61 stewards, plus cooks, cashiers and others. The press described them as "more amenable to official control than the trade unionist firemen and sailors".

Southampton City Heritage



The Cunard Line's *RMS Lancastria* in peacetime

*Lancastria* was attacked and sunk in 1940. The 'HMT Lancastria Association' has collected and published the memories of many survivors. Others appear on the BBC web site 'People's War'. Many refer to arrival in Plymouth; coming ashore, cheering crowds at the dockside and on the streets, and hearing the Royal Marine Band at the Barracks nearby.

Private Collection

## Survivor Stories

Survivors of two of the world's greatest maritime disasters - one a peacetime tragedy, the other a wartime sinking - were landed at Millbay, Plymouth.

The White Star Liner *Titanic* sank on her maiden voyage, crossing to New York on 14 April 1912. Some 1500 people lost their lives. Most of the surviving crew were brought back to Plymouth aboard the Red Star liner *Laplant*. The tender *Sir Richard Grenville* eventually landed them at Millbay - long after the paying passengers and mail.

On 17 June 1940 the Cunard liner *Lancastria*, serving as a troopship, was attacked and sunk helping to evacuate military forces from St Nazaire, France. The loss of life remains unknown, although Churchill later suggested 3000. Estimates vary from between 4000 and 7000. Coming so soon after Dunkirk the tragedy was kept secret. The official records remain closed.

### **Titanic Survivors**

Crew survivors of *Titanic* arrived in Plymouth Sound on 28 April 1912. Board of Trade officials boarded *Laplant* to collect witness accounts of the sinking to be used as evidence. The officials of the British Seafarer's Union were not invited.

All pay had stopped when *Titanic* sank and the seamen survivors worked their passage home. Once ashore at Millbay they refused to make any statements until their Union officials were allowed to join them. It was agreed that they would not be kept at Plymouth for long.

### **Lancastria Survivors**

Those rescued from the sea were eventually put aboard a variety of vessels ranging from cargo ships and tankers to liners and warships. Many survivors were injured, most were oil covered and few had any possessions - not even clothes or shoes.

A fleet of rescue vessels anchored in the Sound and survivors were ferried into Millbay by tender - these included *Baharistan*, *City of Lancaster*, *City of Mobile*, *Clan Ferguson*, *Cymbula*, *Dundrum Castle*, *Fabian*, *Floristan*, *Glen Affric*, *John Holt*, *Oronsay*, *Robert L Holt*.

### **Arrival in Plymouth, 1940**

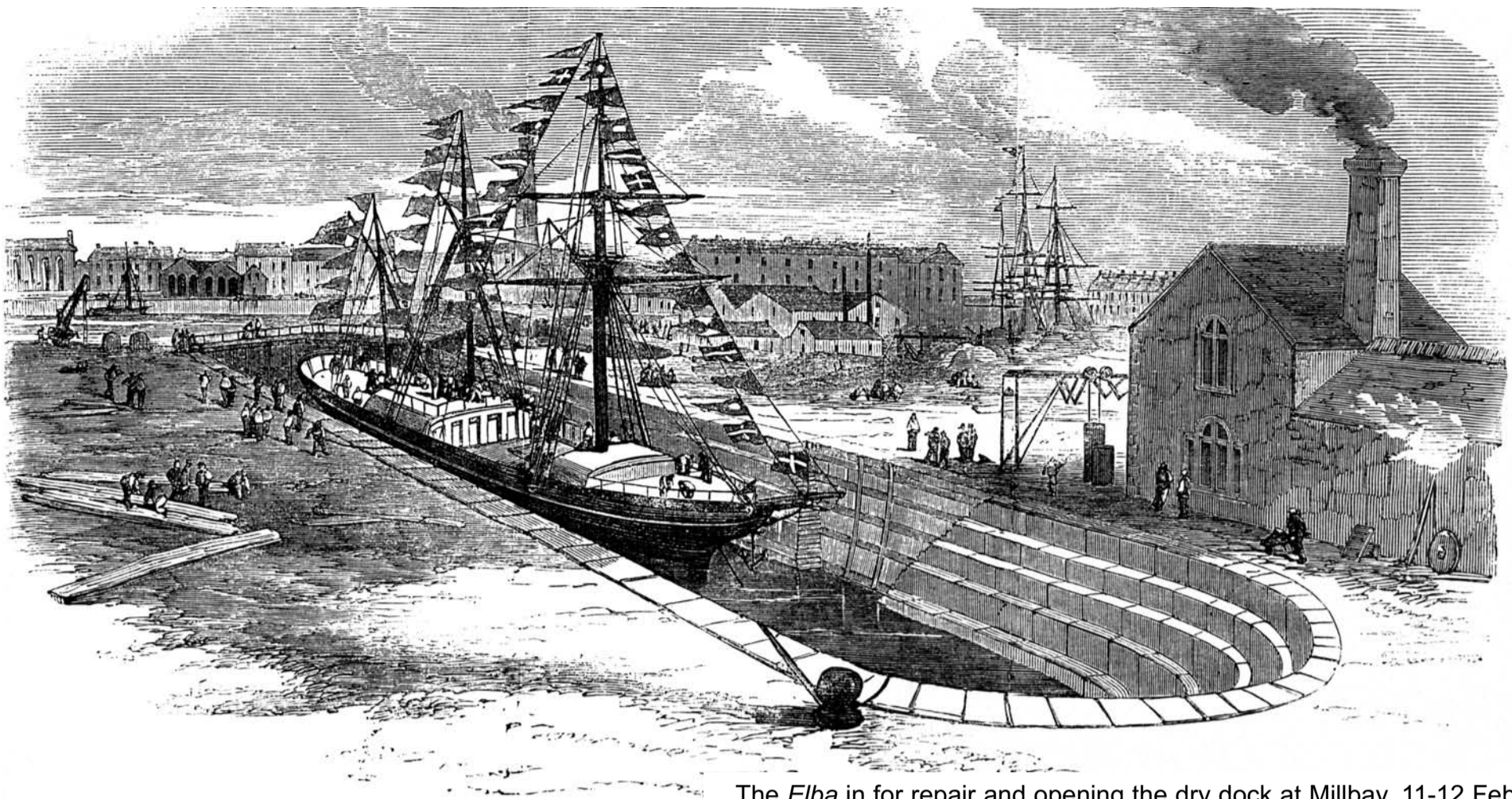
Volunteers gave out tea, food and writing materials. Civilians and shop owners organised free fish and chips, cigarettes and postcards. Some survivors were soon on a train. The injured were taken to local hospitals. Others were sent to billets to wash and get kitted-out - these included Stonehouse Barracks, the Naval Barracks, RAF Mount Batten, the Ballard Institute and local church halls.

"I remember the day the call went out for help in what was then Millbay Docks... ..where thousands of these poor unfortunate men were being brought ashore...in great disarray, some in rugs or blankets, some shoeless, some even wrapped in newspaper...they were absolutely exhausted."

Mrs Isabella Maclean-Bawden

"We arrived there at two, but so great was the queue of incoming traffic...that we did not disembark until eight o'clock in the evening. ...And such a welcome we got in Plymouth - all of us in our funny survivor's clothing being cheered to the echo."

Mr I. Macpherson



The *Elba* in for repair and opening the dry dock at Millbay, 11-12 February 1857

The pumphouse was not ready and a small pump was brought in to empty the dock. Shipbuilder John Shilston supervised the shoring. The Plymouth Foundry did the repairs.

'Illustrated London News', 1857: PCMAG Collection

## Ship Repair

The earliest plans for a large non-tidal dock at Millbay included a 'graving' or dry dock for ship repair. A dry dock was opened along with the Inner Basin in February 1857.

Plymouth ship builders and engineering firms were keen to rent land from the Dock Company. The dry dock appears to have been hired as needed for ship repair by the shipbuilders who had set up yards nearby. The firm of Willoughby took on the lease and began a long association with Millbay which continued until the closure of the dry dock in 1969.

Some shipbuilding took place at Millbay. Willoughby's built various vessels including local ferries. Ship refits, repairs, surveys and fit-outs provided regular work. Local steamers and ferries, small tankers, cable ships and lightships were often to be seen in or alongside the dry dock.



*Arnet Robinson*, 'Liverpool Pilot Boat No.3' at Millbay, c1960

A ship built by Phillip & Co., Dartmouth, Devon in 1956.

Associated British Ports Collection: Southampton City Heritage



The Inner Dowsing Lightship at Millbay, c1950

Willoughby's did a lot of work for Trinity House.

Courtesy: Alan Kittridge Collection

### Millbay Dry Dock

The dry dock was 367ft (112m) long, of step-sided construction with a top width of 92ft (28m). The entrance was 80ft (24.5m) wide - designed for paddle steamers. It was so successful that a second dry dock was planned in 1860 - but not built. The dry dock was later lengthened to 445 ft (136m). It was closed in 1969 due to the cost of repair and, later, filled in.

### Willoughby's

Founded in the mid-1800s, the Company eventually set-up in and around the dry dock at Millbay. Willoughby's took over Moir's 'Phoenix Street' Foundry in 1890. Later, in 1921 they bought Ellacott & Son's works on Millbay's East Quay - but soon moved from the site. In 1958 Willoughby's expanded again by joining with Bickle & Co., dock engineers and iron shipbuilders who, since 1887, had had their own works and foundry just south of the dry dock. Willoughby's continued in engineering and ship repair at Millbay until 1969.