

Helensburgh Heritage Trust Newsletter

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The Lucy Ashton and her Jet Engines

After leaving school Ian Gillies went to work at Denny's Shipyard in Dumbarton where, after a period working in the offices, he became an apprentice rigger. The principal work of a rigger is to put up the masts and other rigging on a ship but, in the case of riggers at Denny's, they also took the vessels out on trial as temporary crew and were involved in the delivery of new vessels to their owners. One unusual variation on this work was that Ian served on the "Lucy Ashton" when she was fitted with jet engines. The "Lucy Ashton" had been one of the best known and best loved Clyde steamers. She was built in 1888 at T B Seath's shipyard in Rutherglen - the only North British vessel to be built there - as part of the North British Railway Company's fleet for service out of Craigendoran. Indeed she spent most of her life on the service from Craigendoran up the Gareloch, and also as the ferry across to Greenock. At several points in her career she was on the brink of being sold off, but she was a survivor! The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 led to all the Craigendoran steamers with the exception of the "Lucy Ashton" being called up for minesweeping and anti-aircraft duties. Consequently she single-handedly provided the wartime service from Craigendoran to Gourock and Dunoon in summer and winter - travel beyond Dunoon was impossible because of the anti-submarine boom which stretched from Dunoon across the Clyde to the Cloch Lighthouse. In addition she served as a tender to some of the troop ships lying off the Tail o' the Bank.

The London and North Eastern Railway Company, owners of all the Craigendoran steamers since 1923, wanted to resume full passenger sailings as quickly as possible after the War. However some of their vessels had been lost to enemy action, most notably the "Waverley" at Dunkirk; moreover the vessels commandeered by the Navy required alterations to make them suitable for the return to passenger service. Consequently the "Lucy Ashton" continued in service for another four years after the War. One would have expected her to be sent to the shipbreaker's yard in 1949, but that did not happen. Instead she was purchased by the British Shipbuilding Research Association (BSRA) who wanted to do tests on different hull shapes, and to see what effect they had on the resistance to travel through water, and hence also on speed. The BSRA had already produced six wax hull models of the "Lucy Ashton" for use in the Denny Tank in Dumbarton, and her purchase enabled them to do comparative tests between the wax models and the full-size hull.

Continued overleaf

Then and Now Exhibition

The Anderson Trust exhibits some of its paintings at Helensburgh Library for the first six months of each year. Having selected 28 images of the town and district the Trustees challenged Helensburgh Photographic Club to create comparable pictures to show the changes which have taken place over the years. Well worth a visit, free and on show on the balcony during library hours until the end of June. *KNC*

Helensburgh Memorabilia

Possibly the best attended and certainly the most contributed to meeting the Trust has held was on 28 January. All kinds of artefacts were produced and laid out for inspection. Stewart started by showing and explaining his framed Map of Lennox, printed in 1653 but surveyed by Timothy Pont maybe 50 years earlier - as Minister of Dunnet just how did he find the time? Then we were shown the 1733 plan of Milligs - possibly the Sale Plan by Sir John Schaw, imagination? But some elements seem to have happened!

On to 1805 and the School Minute Book recently acquired by the Trust, research and study needed, but the authors were keen to say who was there and less about the detail of the decisions! The collection of old bottles 'rescued' from the land opposite Hermitage Academy was demonstrated and a number of connections made.

The Life of Benjamin Franklin was given as a Grant Street School Prize for Excellent Attendance and Conduct but only fair Progress in an Evening Class on 3 February 1878. A member wonders when Grant Street closed? *A picture of Old Gareloch adorned a poster for Polish sold by Baird and McDonald. THE Baird?* Two 1939 photos of the interior of the Royal Bank of Scotland opposite the Station included men still known. This led to a discussion of the sites of all of the various Banks that have operated in the Town!

*Postcards from a Prisoner of War, perhaps working on the Sloy Power station in 1946 contrasted with a photo of four Commando billeted in the town, but who it is thought did not survive action. Another showing Merchant Ships laid up in the Gareloch in 1931 - perhaps times are going full circle. A whole collection of memorabilia of Jack Buchanan included a programme showing Fred and Adele Astair appearing for him as Act 12! Finally, a mystery for you to solve for us. A plaque commemorating **H. DAWSON BAIRD and D. W. HAMILTON MARSHALL**. "Called to Higher Service" Who were they? When were they?*

KNC

The Sheep's Heid Building

This building lies in the centre of the block formed by West Clyde Street, John Street, West Princes Street and James Street. Its entrance lies between the Masonic Lodge and Princes Court, and it can most easily be seen from there. I am grateful to Marion Gillies, the speaker at our November meeting, for finding out how the building got its name.

In the past a sheep's head was an inexpensive and hence popular dish in Scotland. Sometimes it is said, the purchasers would ask the butcher to leave the eyes in so that 'it would see them through the week!' The head could be boiled until the meat fell off, this dish being known as potted heid: it could also be used as the basis for soup. Recipes can easily be found on the internet.

The Sheeps Heid building here in Helensburgh was erected to house some of the navvies working on the construction of the West Highland Railway, which started in 1889. A sheep's head would have been a popular dish with them too so, as a joke, someone, (probably one of the builders) placed a boiled sheep's head in the foundations of the building!

HSN

A warm welcome to new readers of this Newsletter. Especially to Pupils of Hermitage Academy who are invited to submit short notes of their historical discoveries or enquiries about our Town

The Lucy Ashton and her Jet Engines (Concluded)

To carry out these tests the "Lucy Ashton's" paddle wheels, sponsons and engines were all removed along with much of the decks. Consequently not much more than the basic hull and a bridge were left. A little aft of the bridge a structure was built across the hull, extending beyond it on either side. To this were fitted four Rolls-Royce Derwent jet engines, and the "Lucy Ashton" underwent speed tests on the measured mile in the Gareloch. The crew had to spend a considerable amount of time at the start of each test day calibrating the jet engines. Not only were many scientists on board, monitoring the tests with their instruments, but this is when Ian Gillies became involved too.

The noise, Ian says, was ear-splitting. The crew were provided with ear protectors, but they could scarcely hear one another speak above the roar of the jet engines. In fact Ian recalls that the noise was so great that it could even be heard in Dumbarton!

Fortunately these tests did not occur on a daily basis. There were periods when the "Lucy Ashton" was towed to one of the various dry docks on the Clyde at that time. At one point a smooth thin concrete skin was applied, and the "Lucy Ashton" returned to the speed trials in the Gareloch. Later the concrete skin was modified so as to mimic overlapping hull plates, and further tests were then carried out. Ian even got the chance to steer the "Lucy Ashton" when she was under tow en route to a dry dock.

During this period the "Lucy Ashton" lay at a mooring buoy off Faslane, and Ian and his colleagues from Denny's would travel there from Dumbarton on board "The Second Snark" which at that time belonged to Denny's who used it principally as a tender and to tow barges between the shipyard and their engine works which were situated just beside the Dalreoch railway bridge.

"Have you ever heard of a ship with a handbrake?" Ian asked me. When I answered in the negative, he replied "Well, the "Lucy Ashton" had one!" Anyone who has watched the "Waverley" or other paddle steamers will know that the way to slow down or stop such a ship is to stop the paddle wheels, or perhaps even put them into reverse. When the "Lucy Ashton" had her jet engines, the paddle wheels had been removed and in those days there was no reverse thrust for jet engines. Consequently the only way to stop her was to devise a system similar to the stopping of the paddle wheels. This was the "handbrake". When the "handbrake" was released in the wheelhouse, two steel plates descended into the water, one on either side of the hull. This was the only way of stopping the vessel when under jet power!

Many of the "Lucy Ashton's" fans were sorry to see the old ship not allowed to go peacefully to the breaker's yard after 61 years of service, but to be used for this undignified experiment instead. One reason for their affection was that she was the last of the old-fashioned Victorian paddle steamers - thus for example, despite a number of alterations during her life, the bridge was a high platform located between the paddle boxes with the result that the view forward from the steering wheel was obscured by the funnel! Others felt that it was good that the old ship could still make a contribution to science after so many years of service, and in fact the BSRA produced a technical paper giving the results of the tests, and this was highly thought of worldwide by naval architects. Whatever one's feelings, the experiments with the jet engines ended after two years, and the "Lucy Ashton" was finally broken up at Faslane in 1951.

Stewart Noble

Final Public Meetings of the Season

Wednesday 25th February 2009 at 7.30

Dennis Royal

Author of "United States Navy Base Two"
Americans at Rosneath in the Second World War

Wednesday 25 March 2009 at 7.30 p.m.

Dr Douglas Brown

Images across Space -
Looking at Personalities and Technologies in the
Baird Television Company