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**THE DARTMOUTH HARBOUR PAPERS**  
**Part Four**

## **III THE FERRIES**

**By**

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There are three ferries between the east and west banks of the Dart at Dartmouth. Two of these were closely linked with the operation of the railway and as a certain amount of erroneous information has appeared on their history they deserve a separate paper.

### **The Lower Ferry**

As far as we know this ferry has operated from time immemorial. As early as 1365 there is a mention of the ferry across the Dart in the Close Rolls where it is described as a monopoly created by the Crown as a safeguard and acquired in that year by William Carey. The maintenance of the ferry was secured by a tithe impressed upon landowners. When Thomas Gale became Lord of the Manor in 1544 the purchase was subject to a payment to the Crown at Michaelmas, in the Court of Augmentation, of a fine of 10/4½d as a ferry tithe. By this time the contribution to this tithe and the upkeep of the ferry had become a 'perk' of the owner. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century the ferry rights were held equally by the Mallock family of Cockington and the Holway family. The passage money was now due from all the hamlets in the parish of Brixham.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century the conduct of the ferry was handed over to a tenant. In 1558 the tenant for life was Robert Collyns at a rent of 12/- (£0.60p.) with half the landing stage. Collyns probably ran the ferry from a slip' at Kittery Point Kingswear. The two-oared pulling ferry crossed from Kingswear to the Old Passage Slip at Bayards Cove, some 300 yards away. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the eastern end of the ferry was transferred to the northern side of Waterhead Creek and known as the Hoodown Passenger ferry. Here was built the Hoodown Ferry House where the innkeeper in 1863 was Mary Burgoine. The move to Hoodown took place between 1558 and 1675 when John Ogilby used it. The reason for the move to Hoodown-New Ground is not known and the crossing distance to the New Ground at about

500 yards was nearly twice that Kittery Point. If the New Ground was more central after that man-made island was embanked nobody mentioned it. The Kingswear village traffic still used the slipway by the Plume of Feathers Inn until the railway came in 1864, but possibly the carriage traffic went from Hoodown because the road approach was better. . For some years before the railway came the ferry at Kingswear was run by the landlord of the 'Plume of Feathers Inn, now the Royal Dart Hotel,. In the 1850's it was a Mr. Cox and after him Thomas Sandover. From October 1865 the Kingswear Ferry was leased to Messrs. Avis & Son of Kingswear, the local postmaster. Three boats were worked by Avis, two pulling boats for passengers and a third as a luggage boat, or horse boat which was supplied by the Dartmouth and Torbay Railway.

The Dartmouth & Torbay Act of 1857 authorised the establishment of a ferry or team communication across the Dart from the intended terminus in Dartmouth. The ferry was to be for the use of all, not just rail passengers. After the loss of the Deviation Bill it was decided not to cross the Dart but to terminate at Hoodown Ferry House, on the north side of Waterhead Creek, where there was ancient ferry. In 1863 when it was decided to extend the line to Kingswear proper an agreement was reached with George Fownes Lutterell to purchase the requisite land and the existing Hoodown and Kingswear Ferries. Due to an oversight the conveyance was not made until 10 years later in November 1873 and at a price of £3,100. The Hoodown pulling ferry was abandoned in 1864 and the Kingswear ferry became the Lower Ferry. Apart from the pulling ferry there was until about 1839 a horse or wagon ferry which ran from the Ferry Slip at Kingswear, to the Old Passage Slip to the south of Island House. In 1839 a new Ferry Slip to the north of Island House had been built and the old slip abandoned. This, now the present slip, was enlarged in 1867. The Horse boat was a wide float propelled by two men with long sweeps It was capable of carrying one cart and up to two horses. From 1867 it ran from a new slipway just south-east of the new railway station, whereas the passenger ferry ran from the station pontoon on each side.

The Dartmouth and Torbay Railway Act of 1857 gave the Post-Master General powers to send mails by any boats run by the Company and the latter were to run boats for such mails after notice by the Post-Master General on a penalty of £20. This ferry was converted to steam operation in 1869 when Tom Avis' new steam launch **Pioneer** came into service. This boat was built by J Samuel White at Cowes. Unfortunately, when on passage to Dartmouth the boat struck a rock at the entrance to Weymouth Harbour and had to be beached for repairs. The **Pioneer** could carry 30 passengers and had a speed of 8 knots. Her crossing time was 1½ minutes or 3½ minutes when propelling the horse boat. Her principal dimensions were-Length 30.6 ft, breadth 7 feet, maximum draft 2'11". Power was provided by a White patent HP engine and a 4-bladed propeller. The Horse boat was built early in 1865 and could accommodate at laden 4 ton wagon with 2 horses. The hull had a loading prow at either end or ease of working. The design has remained unchanged until very recently when hydraulic opening gear was installed.

In October 1867 the Ferry Slip at Kingswear was improved by the addition of a small quay giving direct access to the hotel building without going under the arch. At the same time the Dartmouth Ferry Slip was widened and a better landing ramp provided. Horses dragging heavy wagons up this slip were shod with 'nibbed' shoes that would take hold between the stones of the ramp.

In October 1877 the lease was transferred to G.A and J.W Casey Brothers for 5 years at a rent of £73 pa. The Casey brothers improved the smartness and punctuality of the service. Their new steam launch was named the **Forester** after the Masonic lodge which they were members. The **Forester**, built in 1877 by John Houston at Combe, was a steam powered launch of the same general design as the **Pioneer**, certificated for 30 passengers, and was used as a tug to propel the Horse-boat on Mondays-Saturdays, but ferried passengers on Sundays. The normal pulling boats were used for passengers 6 days a week. The Casey brothers continued to run the ferry till 1901 when John Casey died and was replaced by his son, Tom. When George retired in 1909 Frederick Heal joined Tom Casey. The rowing boats were replaced in 1915 by the steam launch **Relief** and a new tug the **Hauley** joined the **Forester**. The Lower Ferry remained in the hands of Casey & Heal until September 1925 when the Great Western Railway sold the rights to the ferry to the Dartmouth Town Council for £100 and £5 per annum rental for the Kingswear Slip. Tom Casey would not tender for the new lease, partly because of the onerous conditions and also because the Town Council had not supported him in his appeals for deferment from military service, when he, almost single-handed, had run and maintained the Lower Ferry. What happened after this can be read in the book '*Ferries of the South-West*'. Wherein it is noted that one of the launches that were introduced by the Council was named the **Perseverance**. For two years after 1925 Tom Casey ran a competing service from Gibbs Steps at Kingswear using his own boat named **Ill Try** but with so many boats in competition the return was not worth the effort.

### **The Great Western Railway Steam Ferry.**

This is how the Great Western Railway official documents refer to the passenger ferry that crossed the Dart from the pontoon at Kingswear Station to that at Dartmouth Station. The station replaced the original 'box on a pontoon' station in 1889-1890. This station building still stands as the Station Restaurant. The box on a pontoon was connected to the shore by a swinging span bridge connected by a hinge to a fixed pier portion which was fixed to the south wall of the Boat Float where it ended until 1890. Though the rights of the ferry remained with railway until 1972 the ferry was operated by Charles Seale-Hayne's Dartmouth Steam Packet Company until 1872.

The first railway steamer was the **Perseverance**. This vessel is not mentioned in the book '*Paddle Steamers of the Dart*' which contains several errors of omission and fact. In 1864 this vessel was not ready until 1<sup>st</sup> October. The trains ran from 16<sup>th</sup> August and so the ferry service was provided by 2 stand-by boats- the **Louisa** built 1856 and the **Newcomin** built 1864. Both steamers belonged to the Dartmouth

Steam Packet Co. Both of these vessels were engaged on the summer run to Totnes.

The ***Perseverance*** was bought second-hand and was overhauled and converted by Lewis & Stockwell of Thameside, who were also builders of the ***Newcomin***. The vessel was expected to cost £500-£800. In service she proved difficult to handle owing to her double-ended construction and double-ended steering. A paddle steamer of some 50-60 tons register she had a high side-wind resistance and even on the sheltered waters of Dartmouth Harbour this disadvantage was most marked. In addition her overhauled engines began to prove troublesome. In March-May 1865 ***Perseverance*** was off-station for an extensive overhaul to her machinery and boiler at the works of the Plymouth Foundry Co. During this period ***Louisa*** was the ferryboat.

The full cost of the ***Perseverance*** was revealed at the March 1866 Annual General Meeting of the Dartmouth & Torbay Railway. Charles Seale-Hayne referring to the high cost of the vessel said that they had expected to pay between £800-£1050 and had made arrangements with Lewis & Stockwell. Subsequently, a dispute arose over the cost of the work and an arbitrator made an award against them bringing the total cost to £1,769-13-8d. (£1,769.67p.) The ***Perseverance*** was off-station again from February until September 1868 and a stand-by steamer from the Dartmouth Steam Packet Company operated. Soon after her return to work the vessel was in collision with a coal lighter on the Dart. Due to a shortage of steam she became uncontrollable and after the collision the lighter sank. A court action against the railway company went against them. By now the South Devon Railway had absorbed the Dartmouth & Torbay Railway and they decided to commission a new boat to replace the ***Perseverance*** from Messrs Harvey of Hayle. This boat was designed by the South Devon Railway Locomotive Superintendent, Mr. Wright, especially for the Kingswear Steam Ferry and after another overhaul the engine and boiler from the ***Perseverance*** were fitted to the new hull. The paddle-steamer was named the ***Dolphin*** and was a double-ended iron-hulled steamer fitted with two drop-rudders for easy manoeuvring. ***Dolphin*** weighed 61 tons and was 105' length by 15' beam. She was certificated to carry 331 passengers and took up station on 24<sup>th</sup> August 1869. Her average crossing time was 4 minutes. From August 1869 until June 1872 the ***Dolphin*** was on the books of the Dartmouth Steam Packet Company and who worked her at a loss, but after that date the South Devon Railway took her over. This was possibly because of Seale Hayne's resignation from the Board of that Company under strained circumstances.

A new boiler was authorised for the ***Dolphin*** in the following year at a cost of £500 and she was off-station until 16<sup>th</sup> September 1873 whilst this was fitted. The Great Western Railway became the owner of the ***Dolphin*** in 1876 and in 1889 the Great Western Railway were paying the now renamed Dartmouth Steam Packet Company, the Dartmouth & Torbay Steam Packet Co. £5 per day for a replacement vessel and crew when the ***Dolphin*** was not available with a guaranteed minimum of £150. After 1880 this was increased to £6 per day and £180 minimum per annum. The Steam Packet company were required to keep a boat in readiness at all times

and the boats to be made available had to be either the **Berry Castle, Dartmouth Castle** or **Totnes Castle**. On 7<sup>th</sup> March 1902 the **Dolphin** was spruced up and fitted out as a Royal Barge for the visit of King Edward VII on the occasion of his visit to Dartmouth to lay the foundation stone of the Royal Naval College. In 1904 the funnel of the **Dolphin** was lengthened, presumably to provide better draughting at low speed. After nearly 40 years reliable and steady service the Great Western Railway decided to replace the **Dolphin** with a newer larger ferry.

A contract was entered into with Messrs Cox of Falmouth on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1907 for the new vessel at a price of £5100. She was to be named **The Mew**. Her principal dimensions were length 90', breadth 22½', depth 8½' and tonnage 117 tons. She was a twin screw steamer with two engines capable of producing 250 hp and a speed of 10 knots. The main deck provided covered accommodation whilst the promenade deck was completely open and free of obstructions to maximise her carrying capacity. Fully laden **The Mew** was certificated to carry 547 passengers, 216 more than **Dolphin**. I suspect that the only time she carried so great a number was during the Great War when troops were transferred from their training camp at Dartmouth to troop trains at Kingswear en route to France. After extensive testing when her manoeuvring and speed capabilities were found to be better than the builders guarantee, **The Mew**, entered service at Kingswear on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1908. After the Great War Great Western Railway motor vehicles crossed the Dart on the Horse-boat at 2/4d. (£0.12p.) a time and over the period of a year this mounted up and so in 1924 the old pontoon bridges were strengthened at a cost of £800 and the deck of **The Mew** was strengthened and the after cabin was removed. Both Great Western Railway vehicles and private cars were carried. As soon as the Casey-Heal partnership lease expired the Great Western Railway began carrying their own vehicles on **The Mew**. Thus **The Mew** became an early prototype roll-on roll-off ferry. The vehicles drove on to the vessel down one pontoon and off over the pontoon at the other side. In 1928 new pontoon bridges manufactured by John Lysaght & Co. Ltd of Bristol replaced that of 1864 on the Kingswear side and that of 1890 on the Dartmouth side. As already related the after cabin of the ferry was removed in 1924 so that the vessel could carry road vehicles and at the same time a covered wheelhouse was fitted instead of the original open structure. Vehicles coming down the pontoon bridges were constrained in their path by low walkways along the sides. These gave protection to foot passengers.

Destined to have an even longer service life than the '**Dolphin, The Mew** 'did her bit' for the war effort in June 1940 when she answered the call for help at Dunkirk. Piling coals upon her deck she steamed at her full speed, 10 knots, for 28 hours. Her boilers became red-hot, but, alas, to no avail. When she arrived she was dismissed as unsuitable for beach work and returned, less speedily, to her normal duties, albeit with new firebars. Shortly after the WW II the appearance of **The Mew** was altered when her forward cabin was enlarged and the stovepipe funnel changed. **The Mew** made her final run after no less than 46 years in service, on 8<sup>th</sup> October 1954. To the sound of ships sirens and rockets and witnessed by crowds of people lining the banks of the Dart. Rather than hire one of the River Dart Steamboat Co.'s boats the railway hired a 50 ft motor boat the **Lady Elizabeth** which had to suffice until the

arrival of two purpose-built 55' wooden motor boats in 1957. These 35 ton Diesel engined craft were named the **Adrian Gilbert** and the **Humphrey Gilbert** and were officially named at a ceremony at Kingswear on 18<sup>th</sup> March 1957, entering service immediately.

Withdrawn by British Rail in 1972 when they sold the Goodrington-Kingswear section of railway to the Dart Valley Railway, and the ferry service to the Dartmouth Council, both the **Gilberts'** have by sheer chance returned to their original station. The ferry was run by the Dartmouth Borough Council, utilising the **Gilberts'**, from 1972-74 and by the South Hams District Council 1972-74, following which Dart Pleasure Craft Ltd. took over the ferry. Both former British Rail vessels were tried out on the St. Mawes ferry in Cornwall in 1976 but proved unsuccessful. They were sold back to British Rail in 1977 who re-engined them. **Adrian Gilbert** was purchased from British Rail by Dart pleasure Craft in 1978 and resumed working on the Kingswear-Dartmouth service. **Humphrey Gilbert** was renamed **Edgecumbe Bell** and did not return to the Dart until 1985 having been employed in the interim on the Drakes Island ferry and then the Cawsands ferry at Plymouth.

### **The Floating Bridge or Higher Vehicle Ferry**

Up to the year 1831 the only regular ferry across the Dart was the Kingswear ferry in connection with the old road from Brixham which for centuries had been and was the private property of the various owners of the lands forming the Luttrell Estate. James Meadows Rendle (1799-1856) put forward to Lord Morley a plan for a Floating or Flying Bridge using a chain-drive with a steam driven ferry. This was first considered in 1829. In the previous year (1828) the third attempt to build a suspension bridge across the Dart at Dittisham designed by Rendel and John Foulston (1772-1842) was defeated by local opposition. On 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1829 a meeting was held in the large room on the first floor at the Castle Hotel in Dartmouth, now the dining room, when Rendle and Foulston explained their idea for a bridge. Amongst those present were Lord Morley of Saltram. The plan was agreed, but progress was held up by local politicians bickering. The parties supporting the Floating Bridge were Whigs and the opposition led by the Holdsworths was Tory. Holdsworth and his cronies planned a high level suspension bridge of their own from the Church of St. Barnabas in Southtown Dartmouth to near St. Thomas Church at Kingswear.

It was James Naysmyth (1808-1890) the personal assistant of Henry Maudslay who in 1829, introduced to his employer the idea of a steam-propelled chain guided ferry boat. Maudslay was friendly with James Meadows Rendle and knew of the latter's problems in bridging the Dart and was probably responsible for introducing Naysmyth and Rendle. In 1822 Rendle had designed the Laira Flying Bridge for Earl Morley. Early in 1829 John Foulston and James Meadows Rendle were surveying a crossing of the Dart at Greenway Narrows for a suspension bridge. This bridge proposal was opposed by James Elton of Greenway House. The bridge would have been a part of a coast road from Exeter to Plymouth via Dawlish, Teignmouth, Torquay, Dartmouth and Modbury. Earl Morley had earlier pressed the

Modbury Turnpike trustees to improve their line of road without success. . Rendle then designed a ferry boat on steam and chain principle for crossing Dart.. The boat was guided by the endless chain passing through brass collars affixed to the river bed and operated by shore based machinery. This design was never built or followed up.

In May 1830 a Bill was introduced in Parliament to gain permission to build the Floating Bridge, but it was defeated on the Second Reading by the opposition of the Duchy of Cornwall on the grounds that it would interfere with their rights. Local sources, including the Press, suggested that the Bill would be abandoned, but it was pushed through by Lord Morley and Sir Thomas Acland. The Duchy then withdrew their opposition after the Master Attendant of Plymouth Dockyard said that the proposed ferry would not interfere with navigation.

In 1830 an Act was obtained for the purpose of “establishing and maintaining a Floating Bridge across the Harbour of Dartmouth” and “ for building, erecting...proper piers, wharves, quays... and convenient roads to and from the said bridge on each side of the harbour” (etc). The project formed part of a scheme for connecting South Devon from Torquay to Plymouth with the main coach road to London. And was promoted by Earl Morley and other landowners, particularly John Seale. Later Sir John Seale Bt., who took an active part in promoting the Floating Bridge Bill and became the principal shareholder in the Bridge Company. As with so many other Dartmouth ventures it was to be a financial failure. One clause in the Act involved paying out a £60 annuity to the Luttrell family for loss of earnings on the Kingswear ferries. Col. John Seale, later Sir John brought the project to fruition, but the actual bridge was built by John Mare of Plymouth to the Rendle-Foulston design. As well as providing the Floating Bridge John Seale also built the ‘two miles of ‘good road’ on the eastern side which stretched up to the Brixham Turnpike. The authorising Act of 1830 forced the owners to run even at a loss and the whole project became a millstone around the neck of the Seale family. One reason was the poor approach road from Dartmouth, known as the Sandquay Road on the western side and owned by John Seale.

The bridge itself was the creation of John Foulston and James Meadows Rendle. The first an architect who, amongst other things designed Albermarle Villas in Devonport and the other a leading civil engineer. The foundation stone of the ‘Flying Bridge’ as it was first called was laid by Mrs Seale at Lower Sandquay on 28<sup>th</sup>. April 1831 and it was in full operation by 10<sup>th</sup>. April 1832.

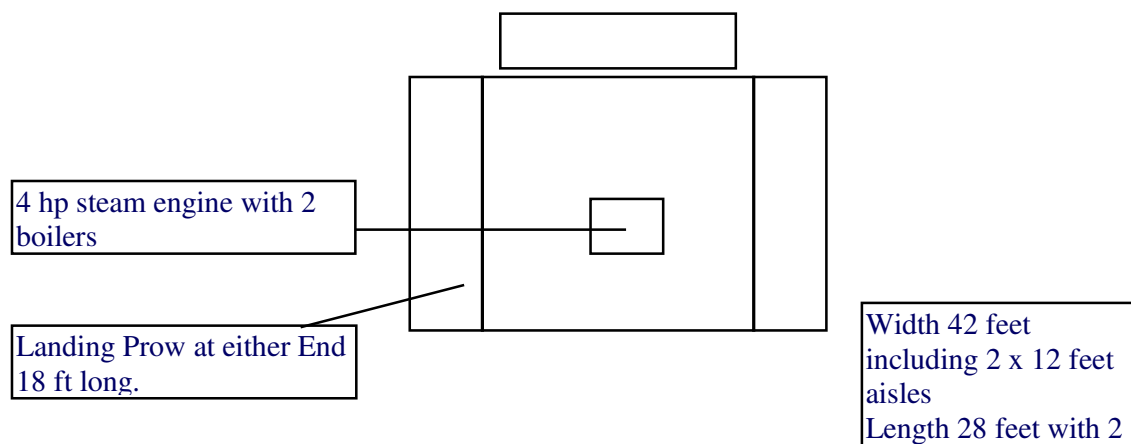




Fig 1 The First Floating Bridge.

There were 2 cast iron chains instead of one wrought-iron chain as first intended by Rendle. The ends of the chain were fixed to large stone anchor blocks and led to the engine and flywheel, which was toothed to drive the chain, via a fairlead. The chain was led away from the power plant by a guide and ramp. The hull of the Floating Bridge was built by Isaac Blackburn of Turnchapel and the engine/boiler unit by John Mare. The first trip was made on 19<sup>th</sup>. August 1831.. The eastern end of the ferry was situated at Old Rock, near Noss Point. Valentine Butteriss , a local journalist, described the bridge as '*a puffing giant*'. The Morley and Seale families were on the opening trip travelling in their open carriages. For the first 4 hours the traffic was east to west only and in 15 trips 60 carriages and 200 saddle horses were conveyed. And many foot passengers. The occupants of the carriages went on to Mt. Boone, the Seale family home, for a sumptuous breakfast.

During 1831/32 the bridge was at work continuously, but financed by a mortgage. No dividends were ever paid and revenue was affected by Post Office Mails being exempt from tolls; laid down in original Act. Lord Morley died in 1840 and Sir John Seale in 1844. After the death of Sir John, his son, Henry Paul Seale, was in possession as Mortgagee. Prior to February 1832 the mail from Newton Abbott, via Torquay and Paignton and Kingswear crossed to Dartmouth over the Lower Ferry. The Post Office paid Mr. Luttrell £15 per anum for the use of his horse-boat service. After 1835 the mail went via the Floating Bridge to Dartmouth. Lord Morley had pestered the GPO to pay the £15 to the Floating Bridge Co. but in an action at law the case was lost.

In 1835 a pair horse mail coach service from Exeter was introduced and Lord Morley asked for £50 a year for the crossing service and offered to have the Floating Bridge on stand-by with steam up when coach was due. Reluctantly, the Postmaster-General agreed to pay the £50, but the steam engine was uneconomic for semi-continuous operation. Although he revenue from the mail coach was important the losses were too great. In 1836 the steam engine was removed and replaced by 2 'blind' horses working on a treadmill winch amidships as per an old cider press. This modification to the 'bridge was carried out by John Mare of Plymouth.

The Floating Bridge worked in this form until in 1855 when there was a catastrophe. In a violent storm the Floating Bridge sank at its moorings. This brought about a "Section 3" default for now there was no Bridge to maintain continuous communication as required by this section of the Act.

The Company was taken over by a consortia led by Thomas Lakeman of Brixham. A Writ of Mandamus was then issued requesting the owner to show just cause for not restoring the service. The Bridge was out of action until the following year when

Sir H. P. Seale as Mortgagee in possession commissioned a new Bridge as the 1836 Bridge was too old and unsafe to repair. The new Bridge designed by George Philip and William Kelly and built by them at Sandquay dockyard; was 30 tons lighter than old one and operated by only one horse on a treadmill. This Bridge was designed for end loading and the horse was housed in a wooden shed placed centrally on the frame of the Bridge. This, the third Bridge, lasted until 1866 when a new steam driven Bridge was designed by Mr. Mansfield, the naval architect, at Sandquay and built by George Philip and Son. In 1874 the Bridge ceased operation for two years and when the service recommenced in 1876 the Bridge was owned by the Trustees of the Raleigh Estate, who commissioned a new steam-driven Bridge from Willoughby & Co. of Plymouth. This Bridge could cross the 1100 feet waterway in 3 minutes. The Floating Bridge was sold to the Torpoint Chain Ferry in 1912 and resold by them to Philip & Son Ltd. in 1918 after that Company had taken over the Noss Works of Simpson-Strickland. The workforce were now assured of transportation across the River Dart from one site to the other. The Higher Ferry has continued to be owned at the time of writing by Philip & Son Ltd.

### **Notes and References**

This paper is an extended version of the similarly named chapter written by the author for the book entitled *'The Railway from Newton Abbot to Kingswear'* written by C. R. Potts and published in 1989 by Oakwood Press to which reference should be made. Also included within that book is an Appendix written by the author dealing with the history of Dartmouth Great Western Railway station. Much of the early history of the Higher Vehicle ferry is to be found in an article in *'Rendel News'*, issue 3/4/1983, contributed by Keith S Perkins.