

REPRODUCED FROM
"Maritime South West 11" - 1998
THE DARTMOUTH HARBOUR PAPERS III

THE DARTMOUTH BUNKERING COAL
TRADE

By

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The biggest change of all at Dartmouth in the 1870's was the establishment of the coaling or bunkering industry. As steamships improved their reliability and began to travel to further destinations the limiting factor to their journeys was their coal fuel, or bunker, capacity. This limitation in capacity meant that that ships had to fill their coal bunkers at convenient ports en route or 'top-up' at either the start or finish of the voyage. These ports where coaling could be carried out were termed bunkering stations. Dartmouth was one of these bunkering stations.

The principal features necessary at a coaling port, or bunkering station, were a wide and deep harbour easy of access and with low harbour charges, coupled with calm conditions prevailing in the sea state at all states of the tide. Dartmouth had such features after 1866 after the harbour was dredged and the top of the Pin Rock, which stood in the fairway, was blasted off. These works were carried out by the Dartmouth Harbour Commissioners which body was formed in 1863. In 1870 the Commissioners introduced a low charge of ½d per ton for ships seeking refuge or calling for orders; this charge became known as the 'bunkering rate' and was one reason why Dartmouth became a bunkering station. Because most ships were not departing from or finishing their voyages at Dartmouth, the operation of filling their part-empty bunkers meant that Dartmouth was known as a 'topping-up' station.

It all began in 1876 when a Dartmouth coal merchant and general haulier, George H. Collins, became agent for the Powell-Duffryn Coal Co. Collins, whose mother had kept the best lodging house in Dartmouth, made his name when he hired out his coal carts to the council when that body were filling-in the Pool. Now Collins was a supplier of house coal to the neighbourhood of Dartmouth and Totnes, but from 1872 he began to supply coal to the Castle Line boats who topped up their bunkers before leaving for the Cape. In 1878 Collins published a booklet entitled '*Dartmouth - A Coaling Station*' setting out the advantages of the harbour as a bunkering port. At first the trade was slow, only 2 or 3 ships each week, but within a few years 80% of the coal imported into Dartmouth went out again as bunkered coal, perhaps as much as 80,000 tons.

As the reputation of the port increased more companies entered the bunkering trade which was highly organised, very competitive and labour intensive. The use of labour was on a strictly casual basis and, because there were always 3 or 4 companies competing to coal any one ship, a coal porter or 'lumper' as the men called their trade, spent a considerable part of his working life 'on the stones' hoping for inclusion in one of the small gangs of coal lumpers, as they became known. Continuous employment could never be guaranteed or justified by the coaling companies, the term by which the employers were known, on economic grounds. Early entrants to the trade were Hingston & Co., Fox & Sons of Plymouth and George H. Collins of Dartmouth.

Many of the men would congregate at Bayards Cove and, using a signal from a watcher above the harbour, race to the coaling hulk in 6 or 8 oared gigs moored at the foot of ladder fixed to the quay wall. Most men waited at the Lumpers Rest on the north embankment for the same purpose. For this group the signal that there was a ship coming in to coal was the appearance of the butchers boat shooting out from Bayards Cove. By tracking his passage up the harbour they would know to which hulk to row. Each coaling company had a boarding agent, who would be rowed out to sea to meet and negotiate with an incoming vessel, using a six oared gig crewed by lumpers. This service was not needed if the house flag of the ship indicated that it was under contract to one of the coaling companies. It was one of these boarding gigs that was struck and sunk by the pilot cutter on a stormy night in 1893. There was only one survivor.¹ The pilot cutter returned to the harbour with part of the gig transfixed on its bowsprit.

Most bunkering coal was shipped to Dartmouth in steam colliers from South Wales or the coalfields of the North and North-East and then transferred to the 'standing' hulks moored in the river on the eastern side of the deepwater channel. After the opening of the Severn Tunnel much coal was brought by train to Kingswear Station where facilities had to be expanded in the period 1893-5 and again in 1902. when a short jetty and coal tipping chute were erected at Hoodown.² By 1886 Hingston and Co. declined the trade of bunkering and put up for sale their coaling hulks. In 1889 Renwick & Wilton landed the contract to supply coal to the Holacombe Gas works at Torquay. The coal was brought by steam colliers, owned by Renwick-Wilton to Kingswear wharf and there unloaded into railway wagons by means of travelling broad gauge steam cranes. The increase in off-loading at Kingswear required a third travelling steam crane which was installed in 1889. These cranes ran on broad gauge rails until the end of their working lives and the electric cranes that replaced them did so as well.³

Each of the coaling companies owned one or more 'standing' hulks of ever increasing size moored on the river, just below the Floating Bridge. The coal lumpers, several hundred in number at the peak of the trade in the late 1890's, were often drawn from immigrant labour from other parts of the British Isles and lived in poor lodgings with even worse sanitation near the river front in Higher Street and Lower Street or on Bayards Cove. From these parts of the town they were on easy call from the coaling company offices when needed. The men who worked in gangs of six to eight had to manhandle the coal from the hulk into baskets and lift these over the side into the bunkers of the vessel being coaled.. Sometimes they had steam winches to assist them, but more often none. The work could be dangerous and for all the physical effort expended a typical weekly wage for a coal lumper in continuous work for

so long a period as a week was £1.7s.0d. (£1.35.). One by-product of bunkering was coal dust which lay over the town in a great cloud when the wind blew from the east of south, but it was a small price to pay for those who benefited from the trade, although it did not do much for the white sails of the yachts and their wealthy and titled owners, nor after 1885 for visitors to Dartmouth as they promenaded along the Embankment.⁴

After Hingston & Co left the trade in 1886 due to falling sales it became obvious that business was leaking away to the coaling station at Portland. The loss of business to Portland, whence George H. Collins had taken much of his Dartmouth custom, became severe in 1888 with a sharp falling off in ships and tonnage handled. Businessmen in Dartmouth decided that they must set up their own company with strong links to the shipping trade both at home and overseas. The result was the formation in November 1888 of the Channel Coaling Co. with Jasper Bartlett as its managing director. Bartlett was the leading provision merchant in Dartmouth with premises on the Quay. The other members of the board were T.H.Whiteway, who had premises at Spithead, near to those of Bartlett, and Edward Marsh Turner, the shipping agent, while the post of Secretary was filled by F.C.Coursens, who had been a boarding agent for one of the coaling companies and knew the day to day working of the business.⁵

The Channel Coaling Co. bought up the hulks of Hingston & Co. and were soon 'up and running'. By March 1889 they were handling 8,000 tons of coal per year and had outstripped George Collins. Another company in the bunkering trade was the Cwm-Amman Coal Co. whose manager in Dartmouth was Thomas Wilton. Wilton had teamed up with Renwick who managed a household coal business in Torquay. As previously mentioned the pair had tendered for and won the contract to supply the Torquay Gas works at Holacombe with coal. Today their company still exists as motor agents under the name of Renwick, Wilton & Dobson Ltd. Another change, in 1890, was that Collins purchased from Powell-Duffryn the coal hulks, which he used and that they owned, in Dartmouth harbour. He ceased to be a commission agent for that company although he continued to buy and handle their coal. In the following year the Cwm-Amman Coal Co. sold their bunkering interests in Dartmouth to Renwick-Wilton. The golden age of bunkering in Dartmouth was over before the end of the century. The peak tonnage of shipping bunkered in Dartmouth was reached in 1890, but the tonnage of coal brought into the port for bunkering continued to rise for several more years.

THE DECLINE OF THE BUNKERING TRADE

Disputes and amalgamation (1901-1914)

In 1901 the total tonnage brought into the port was 159,912, of which 69,920 were for bunkering. From 1901 onwards, both the tonnage of ships and the amount of coal shipped for bunkering began to decline as ships became larger than the port could handle and more coaling stations were set up in places such as at Weymouth and Portland where the Channel Fleet were stationed and where Collins had expanded his business in competition with Dartmouth, which depended to a considerable degree upon 'top up' coaling at the beginning and end of a voyage.⁶ Meanwhile, improvements in marine engineering meant that double and triple expansion engines were being fitted increasingly in merchant ships, drastically

cutting coal consumption per ton/mile. These changes were accompanied by the use of oil fired boilers and followed later by the increasing installation of Diesel engines. All these changes meant that coal bunkering had peaked and it was downhill all the way from now on. Once again in the industrial history of Dartmouth's new industries were needed to compensate for those now declining.⁶ This problem and its solution occurred throughout the 19th century and resulted in the growth of Dartmouth being 'stunted', not only in that century but in the 20th century as well.

In the mid 1880's Fox & Sons had been taken over by the Channel Coaling Co, and at the end of the 19th century only this company, George H. Collins, and Renwick-Wilton were in the bunkering trade at Dartmouth. It was in 1901 that Messrs Forwood Bros. of Liverpool, trading as the Mersey Steamship Co. applied to the Great Western Railway for coal handling facilities and wagon sidings at Kingswear and to the Dartmouth Harbour Commissioners for berthing facilities for the Mersey Line of steamships in Dartmouth Harbour. The Great Western Railway agreed to put in extra siding accommodation at Hoodown, with a junction for access, a jetty and tipping gear for loading coal barges. The cost was to be met by Forwood Bros. and the cost would be returned to them in the form of a rebate on coal brought in by rail.⁷ In 1902 when these facilities were available ships of the Mersey Steamship Co. began a regular series of departures from the port to Morocco. The ships were moored and coaled in the Bight of Dartmouth Harbour where Currie's Castle line had laid down moorings thirty years earlier. Forwood's ships were coaled from barges filled from the tipping chute at Hoodown. Later as rail borne coal became prohibitively expensive, attempts were made to coal the ships direct from a collier alongside.

The years 1904-05 were bad years for trade and coaling tonnage was much reduced. Forwood's business was important for Dartmouth as it was keeping bunkering alive during the depression in trade. The other coaling companies in Dartmouth knew it. A letter written by a coal lumper to the *Dartmouth Chronicle* in 1906 stated that Forwood's employed 30-40 men on a permanent basis, thereby, reducing casualisation.⁸ At the end of 1905 Forwood's stated that an increasing share of the coal brought to Dartmouth by them would be shipped in colliers due to rising rail freight rates. This was a warning to the Great Western to reduce its rail freight rates, but there is no evidence that they did. Consequently, two years later, in July 1907, Forwood applied for permission to moor a standing hulk in the harbour as they were now bunkering ships other than their own. Their share of the total tonnage handled annually was 20,000 tons or $\frac{1}{3}$ of the whole tonnage entering the port, a figure which excludes the tonnage going over Kingswear wharf to Torquay Gas works, averaging 14,000 tons in 1900 and rising.⁹

It was in 1907 that major changes occurred. Forwood Bros. & Co., formed the Dartmouth Coaling Co. Ltd., with H. L. Williams as manager, to handle their growing business in Dartmouth, but the steamship side of the company, trading as the Mersey Steamship Co., became overstretched financially in that year, partly through losing a steamer by stranding and partly through the cost of building the huge Morocco Wharf on the Thames. The directors tried their best, but were unable to stave off liquidation the following year. Before this happened Forwood Bros. had arranged to set up the Dartmouth Coaling Co. as a joint venture with Evans & Reid Coaling Co. Ltd. of Cardiff. Meanwhile, the Liquidator of Forwood Bros. sold the steamship portion of the company to the Royal Mail Steam Packet

Co. Ltd. The final accounts of Forwood Bros. show that the company had total liabilities of £224,850 and against which they could only muster assets of £50,802.¹⁰

The new coaling company was divided 51 / 49 with Forwood Bros. having the controlling share. Evans & Reid paid a sum of £2,950 for 285 shares of the coaling company and 295 shares were held by Forwood Bros. The Dartmouth Coaling Company Ltd was incorporated on 25th October 1907. The directors of the new company were Sir Dudley Forwood, Mr C.E.Evans (later Commander Evans) and a Mr Kellock, who was a partner in the New York agents of Forwood Bros. The company offices in Dartmouth were situated at Bayards Cove in the house which had been the Cottage Hospital from 1887 to 1894, and the London Office in St. Helens Place. In August 1908 the Liquidator transferred 79 shares in the Coaling company to Evans & Reid Ltd, who then transferred them to the R.M.S.P. Co. Ltd. It is not clear from the surviving archives whether control of the coaling company passed to the R.M.S.P.Co or whether by a later agreement it became the total property of Evans & Reid.¹¹

In November 1911 Evans & Reid made a major acquisition when they bought up the complete business and plant of the Channel Coaling Co. for £16,000. The following month, in another move to rationalise the Dartmouth bunkering trade, Evans & Reid bought up the plant and business of George H. Collins & Co. Ltd. for the sum of £18,000. At about the same time Renwick-Wilton gave up their standing hulk to Evans & Reid, in the shape of the Dartmouth Coaling Co. Ltd., but continued supplying an ever increasing amount of coal via Kingswear wharf to the Holacombe Gas Works. Renwick-Wilton sold their hulk to the Dartmouth Coaling Co. Ltd. but were not taken over. In this manner Evans & Reid gained the monopoly of the Dartmouth bunkering trade. However, they did not make this public knowledge, continuing to run the three companies as though they were separate entities, but inevitably the news leaked out and it became common knowledge around Dartmouth by August 1912 that the three companies were now one.¹²

In 1913 despite the slump in trade, brought about by a world-wide depression, resulting in a shrinkage of tonnage handled in the port in that year, the coal lumpers considered whether or not to take industrial action. There were two possible reasons for calling a strike at this time. The lumpers, whose wages had not altered for many years felt that they were being exploited, had observed the effects of the 1911 transport strike on industry, or they felt that the monopoly position of Evans & Reid should be challenged. By now Evans & Reid has swallowed up the Weymouth and Portland companies too. In 1914, after a morale raising visit from Ernest Bevin, they decided to form a branch of the Dock & General Workers Union. The lumpers then put their demands to the coaling companies—a 50% increase in wages, from 2d to 3d per ton handled to meet the rising cost of living.

The coaling companies, as one, rejected the demand and declared an effective lock-out. They advised shipowners to use Portland where Evans & Reid had facilities that were working. The lumpers struck back calling on the Portland men to 'black' diverted ships in sympathy, which they did. The strike dragged on and although the lumpers at Dartmouth hung on as long as they could the empty bellies of their families forced them back to work without them gaining acceptance, in any degree, of their claim.¹³

DISPUTES AND HIGH WAGES

Mechanisation comes to the bunkering trade

In 1913 the Dartmouth lumpers who numbered between 500 and 600 were being paid at the piecework rate of 2d per ton. To earn this tiny amount a gang of 6-8 men would have to transfer 200 tons of coal from the hulk to the vessel being coaled. Assuming that task took 4 hours, this was equivalent to daywork rate of 4/-, for at this rate of working it was not physically possible for a man to work a full 8hr day. In any case, there was not always the work available. There were extra payments such as for mooring the incoming ship amounting to perhaps 10d per man. In these circumstances a fit man might earn £1.7s.0d. (£1.35) per week. To be set against this there was the endemic disease of Arthritis which shortened the working life of most lumpers, brought on either by standing about 'on the stones' or working in all weathers.

There had been no increase in the rate per ton for over 20 years when the shipping trade ran into a bad patch in 1913. Competition for the work became fierce and the lumpers had recently learnt that the coaling companies had merged. Their sense of grievance increased. In 1914 Ernest Bevin the leader of the Dock and General Workers Union addressed a meeting of coal lumpers in Dartmouth and advised them that the best way to address their grievances was to join the Union and demonstrate solidarity. Other branches of the union would support them by 'blacking' any work that the employers attempted to transfer to other ports.

The demand of the men was simple They wanted a wage rise to 3d per ton, a straight 50% increase. The coal companies or in reality, Evans & Reid Coaling Co. Ltd., were adamant that they would not negotiate with the union. When the lumpers walked out, the companies stationed a tug at the harbour entrance directing ships to Portland where Evans & Reid operated as the Weymouth and Portland Coaling Co. Ltd. This in effect was akin to a lock-out. The lumpers called on the Portland men to support them by declaring work transferred from Dartmouth was 'black' which they did. Stalemate ensued and lasted for some time, but hunger and mounting debt forced the men to concede without their claim being met. Nevertheless the union membership grew steadily from this time onwards¹⁴. A 'cooling off' occurred as many lumpers joined the Colours in 1914 and marched off from Dartmouth as a part of Kitchener's volunteer army.

The outbreak of War in 1914 and the loss of men to the armed forces meant that wages rose, until at the end of the wartime period, with frequent increases for the cost of living so that an average wage of £10 per week in 1918 was not uncommon. One result of the high wages and the shortage of suitably fit men was the introduction, by the coaling companies of mechanisation in the shape of 'grabs' - swan necked cranes mounted on floating pontoons - and mechanical coal transporters from hulk to ship. A dispute began when a floating grab and mechanical transporter were fitted to the hulk '*Sabrina*' by the coaling company at the end of October 1917. It is not known whether this 'provocative' move was due to a shortage of physically fit lumpers, the rising cost of coal or a combination of these two factors or whether it was a desire to meet competition by reducing labour costs.

Whatever the reason for the introduction of mechanisation the workers would not accept it and took action to 'black' the '*Sabrina*' and the equipment and called on their Union to support them. The Dockers Union said that grabs had been introduced unilaterally and, that whilst they were not against them *per se*, the men must have their fair share of the savings made from the introduction of labour-saving devices. The Union wanted negotiation with the employers, but the price for the job and the number of men in the gangs was not negotiable. These two factors apart anything was up for discussion.¹⁵

The dispute went to arbitration and in January 1918 a settlement was reached and approved by the arbitrator, Sir George Askwith, Chief Industrial Commissioner. The Dartmouth Coaling Co. Ltd represented the employers and the lumpers were represented by the Dock Workers and the Transport Union. The introduction of labour saving equipment tended to a material displacement of labour and the unions opened negotiations with a view to maintaining the economic position of those workers involved. The union case was presented by Mr. R. Williams whilst Mr. H. L. Williams spoke on behalf of the coaling company. After discussion a settlement was reached on the basis of the conditions prevailing in the Bristol Channel ports. This agreement, said the Dartmouth Chronicle, now awaited ratification by the Arbitrator. It was in this manner that the Dartmouth lumpers came to accept the pool and rota system, a sophisticated version of casual labour. The pool kept out dilution of the workforce by banning new entrants other than the sons of existing lumpers, whilst the rota divided the work evenly between gangs. The money earned was equally shared between the workforce.¹⁶

In April 1918, at a meeting in Plymouth, Mr. R Williams, said that using grabs at Dartmouth meant that 10 men were now employed by the coaling companies to do the work of 50 men employed previously. The coaling companies were now threatening men who complain with discharge and consequent loss of their reserved occupation status. This would make them liable for military service. Williams continued, "*Let them be not deluded by any eyewash about better relations between capital and labour after the War, when they saw such things going on at Dartmouth. What they (workers) wanted was some dominant power which could be used by the workers in their own behalf*".¹⁷ In June 1918 when reporting on moves of union officials, the Editor of the *Dartmouth Chronicle* commented that, in 1914, when the Dockers Union started it had 21 members in the town. The number in the branch had grown to 583 in 1918.

On the basis of Mr. William's speech, this would seem to indicate that 90% of these were in less than full employment. On the occasion of a presentation to Mr. A.J. Martin who was leaving to take up a union post in Exeter, Mr. Dan Hillman, a prominent union official, said that in Dartmouth pre-war lumpers fought each other for jobs. Men worked in shipyards for 4d an hour, but lumpers for half of that. When Mr. Martin started the Dartmouth branch he began with 21 members and now there were 438 paying members on the books of the Dock, Wharf and Riverside Labourers Union.¹⁸

THE FINAL DISPUTE--THE LAST STAND OF THE LUMPERS

The post-war strife between the Dartmouth Coaling Co. Ltd. and the trade unions representing the coal lumpers began at the end of 1922. The coal lumpers had gone on strike

because of the employer's conditions for post-war working. In response the employers closed the port for bunkering. The number of ships using the port had been declining since 1921. In 1922 it was only half the pre-war tonnage. The strike of lumpers reduced the tonnage still further in the following year. The bunkering trade would never recover. The matter was brought to the notice of the Dartmouth Harbour Commissioners by members representing the Town Council just before Christmas of that year. It was proposed that the Dartmouth Harbour Commissioners should attempt to effect a settlement by listening to both sides in the dispute and making proposals. The basic proposals put forward by the employers' were:-

- 1) that there should be a 50% cut in wages paid to the lumpers.
- 2) that extra payments for overtime and obsolete working practices should be abolished.
- 3) that with grabs and transporters in use there was no need to retain the pool and rota system.

The desired meeting was held in Dartmouth Guildhall on 21st December 1922 with representatives of the two unions involved - the Dock Workers and the TGWU. However, the coaling company representatives did not attend as they objected to the unions in principle and because they were not willing to involve a third party in the dispute if that suggested arbitration. Mr. Dan Hillman speaking for the Unions said that they were unwilling to state their case unless the coaling companies were represented. The employer's demands were in the form of an ultimatum, he said. They were offering 1d/man/grab/ton. This was a reduction of 50% in the present basic rate and a return to pre-war wages. Hillman stated that men were ready to put Dartmouth on a par with any other coaling port, but only at a fair wage. Finally, he said, all negotiations should be with the Unions direct and not through the press.

On January 9th 1923 the Commissioners met with Mr. Herbert Lewis Williams, manager of the Dartmouth Coaling Co. Ltd. who reiterated that his Company would not talk with the Unions, and that they were determined to manage their own affairs. Mr. Williams said that unless wages were cut then Dartmouth would become uncompetitive with foreign ports. “*The days when the men could earn £10 a week wages were gone for ever.*” he commented. He accepted that the men wanted better wages than pre-war, “*but to get better wages there must be co-operation between man and master in the interest of the port.*” Mr Williams went on to outline the employers' position on obsolete working practices such as trimming. Customers would not pay for such work especially when it was not done. The 44 hour week was dead, he declared, and payment for overtime was dead also. The present wage proposals were a matter of economics, he added. Mr. Williams went on to state that the Dartmouth Coaling Co. had made a big loss over the past 6 months and, now that Dartmouth was a ‘state of the art’ coaling port, they would retain a total of no more than 50 men who could earn a wage of £2.50 per week. Present trade would not justify more men. The employers would deal direct with the men, but not through their unions, although the men could still be union members, he concluded.

The weeks passed by and the impasse remained. The potential for the coal bunkering trade continued to diminish. Apart from the laying-up of ships, the remaining ships were

becoming larger than the port could handle and replacement vessels now being built were either Diesel powered or had oil fired boilers. The Dartmouth Harbour Commissioners were urged to ask both parties to meet and consider arbitration. Mr. G. N. Philip, one of the Commissioners, said he had already done this and both parties to the dispute were to confer at a meeting in the Guildhall with the DHC on March 26th. At this meeting no settlement could be reached and so the Ministry of Labour were to be asked to intervene in the dispute. With the aid of the Chief Industrial Commissioner of the Ministry an agreed solution to the dispute was found and a settlement was reached after a dispute lasting 9 months. The coal lumpers accepted the wage cut, accepted mechanisation, lost their overtime payment except for work after midnight, but retained the pool and rota system.¹⁹

APPENDIX

Notes and References

1. Files of the *Dartmouth Chronicle* for 1893, Cookworthy Museum, Kingsbridge.
2. *The Railway from Newton Abbot to Kingswear*, C.R. Potts, Oakwood Press, 1989.
3. Ibid
4. Notes of discussion with Don Collinson, historian of Kingswear
5. Ibid
6. Many steamers coaled at Dartmouth after leaving, or going to, their departure port. In these cases only the bunker capacity used on the short trip was replenished. This process was known as 'topping-up'.
- 7., 8, & 9. op.cit. Ref.1
10. DCr. 15/5/1908
11. Minute Book of Evans & Reid Coaling Co.Ltd. Cardiff.
12. Ibid. There was a verbatim report of the relevant meeting of the Dartmouth Harbour Commissioners in the *Dartmouth Chronicle* in August 1912
13. There are extensive reports in the *Dartmouth Chronicle* during 1913 and 1914
14. Various issues of *Dartmouth Chronicle* and Dartmouth Harbour Commissioners Minute Book 1922-1923
15. Ibid.
16. DCr. 16/1/1918
17. DCr. 26/4/1918
18. DCr. 14/6/1918.
19. Dartmouth Harbour Commissioners Minute Book 1922-23. The Harbour Commission under their new constitution were able to act in mediation during this lengthy dispute