

Historical Background:

The Earles were originally a York family until George Earle came to Hull to set up business; he and his brother Thomas founding a pioneering cement works in 1821 (which was eventually taken over by Blue Circle). Thomas's sons, Charles and William, repeated the pattern of a sibling business partnership, setting up C. and W. Earle in 1845. They bought Junction Foundry from James Livingston who had built the first iron steam packet in 1831.

The Earle brothers were millwrights, founders and general smiths whose move to ship engineering happened at a propitious moment. Shipbuilding in early nineteenth-century Hull concentrated on wooden whalers and trade vessels under sail, but Livingston's iron steam packet marked the new direction in ship building. The Earles opened a shipyard at the east end of Victoria Dock after it opened in 1850 and by 1851 they employed 72 men. In 1853 their first steamship, the 'Minister Thorbecke', was launched. They initially rented land from the Hull Dock Company and papers about their association with this company over several years are at U DEA/9-11.

The 1850s was a good decade for shipbuilding for other reasons; the combination of increasing Australian trade with the need for ships for the Crimean war elevated demand. The opening of the Suez Canal in the late 1860s also stimulated shipping trade and, therefore, shipbuilding. Thus in 1863 the Earle brothers bought another 47 acres of land, this time on the banks of the Humber. Their enormous success reflects the success of Hull as a port at the time. Over 60% of their vessels were built for local firms and nearly two thirds of these were destined to become ships of the Wilson line based in Hull. Between 1854 and 1871 Thomas Wilson Sons and Company bought 55 ships and 38 of them were built by C & W Earle.

In 1870 Charles and William Joel Earle built their largest ship, the 'Canopus', a ship of 2800 gross tons. Charles then died suddenly and he was followed to the grave by William a year later, in 1871, at the age of only 49. They left behind assets of nearly a quarter of a million pounds. Some notes on the early history of the firm can be found at U DEA/1. William Earle sold the firm just before he died and it became a public limited company called Earle's Shipbuilding and Engineering Company Ltd. Notices of the sale are at U DEA/7-8. The company was now owned by shareholders in London, Manchester and Sheffield and its fortunes fluctuated with the general fortunes of the English economy and, in particular, the shipbuilding industry.

The 1870s were bad years for shipbuilding, though the fortunes of Earle's seem to have fluctuated more wildly than most for several reasons. Firstly, the new managing director of the firm, Sir Edward James Reed (1830-1906), brought from his old job at the Admiralty a host of international contacts, but also some eccentric ideas about shipbuilding. He built ships for the Grand Duke of Russia, who actually came to Hull to pick out the furnishings, as well as the 'Francesca' for the Duke of Marlborough, which featured a saloon built of teak and velvet divans and silk curtains. However, he also built the 'Bessemer', the design of which was so unstable that on its first voyage it failed to answer the helm twice and completely destroyed two piers. The 'Bessemer' featured a vast saloon which was suspended on hydraulics to correct against the ship's movements. This swinging saloon ended its days as Swanley college's lecture theatre before being bombed during the second world war. During the 1870s the firm was also committed to a number of rather unprofitable contracts made in the last few months of William Earle's life, when he compensated for the uncertainty of the future of the firm by taking whatever contracts came along.

Hull History Centre: Earle's Boilershop photographs

The 1880s were generally boom times for shipbuilders, but several factors dragged down the success of the company. In 1880 it built the 'Assyrian Monarch', a 4000 ton vessel for Royal Exchange Shipping of London. This was its first steel-hulled vessel. The massive size of this ship helped prompt the decision in 1881 to build a new patent slip and tidal dock to accommodate larger ships, especially American liners. But the economies of scale involved in building large ships were not good. However, two things offset this problem; the company also began building purpose-built steam trawlers, with separate fish rooms and ice storage areas, to supply the Hull trawl fishing industry and, more importantly, it began building triple expansion engines. In 1882 the 'Draco', one of the Wilson liners, was powered by this new and powerful engine and the company went on to become the British leaders in manufacturing these engines. A description and illustration of the works is at U DEA/17.

The 1890s were more difficult years, of depression and consequent labour disputes. However, the company continued to be employed on big contracts and it launched two huge first class cruisers, the 'Endymion' and the 'St George', in 1893. A statement of claim for these ships is at U DEA/22 and estimates for other ships built in the 1890s are at U DEA/5. The company stayed afloat through concentrating on warships (some built for the Japanese) and high quality passenger liners in order to stay ahead of their British rivals. These efforts did not stop the company going into voluntary liquidation in 1900, eventually being sold for £217,500 to Charles Wilson of the Wilson line.

The company took off again for a while, in 1905, employing nearly 2000 people and with over 40% of its orders being placed by the Wilson line. In 1907 it built its biggest ship, the 5000 ton 'Buffalo'. The firm ran as a private limited company and continued in the ownership of various Wilson family members despite the takeover of their main business by Sir John Ellerman in 1916. However, it was finally overtaken by depression and collapsed in 1932. The gantry from the works was shipped to Hong Kong where it failed to dominate the skyline as it had in Hull and as late as the 1980s one of the firm's vessels was plying the waters of Lake Titicaca in Peru.

Custodial history:

Donated by Mrs Jennifer Collins, her grandfather Henry Heath was foreman in the photos.

Description: Three mounted photographs (but only two different images) of Earle's Boilershop apprentices and employers taken in September 1910.

Extent: 3 items

Related material:

Records of Earle's Shipbuilding and Engineering Co Ltd 1858-1909 [Ref U DEA]

Copies of the book *Earles of Hull* by Arthur Credland published in 1982 [Ref L 623.8 EAR] are held at the History Centre

Access conditions:

Access will be granted to any accredited reader. Due to the fragile nature of the original items, colour copies produced by overhead scanner will be produced.

Hull History Centre: Earle's Boilershop photographs

U DX363/1 Earle's Boilershop Apprentice's Mounted photograph showing the apprentices in front of vessel No 568 (which became the "Blackburn" built for the Great Central Railway Company) surrounded by the tools of their trade. A slightly small and sharper version of this same image can be found at U DX363/2.
Harry Alba, Photographer
1 item

Sep 1910

Due to the fragile nature of the original item, a colour copy produced by overhead scanner will be produced

U DX363/2 Earle's Boilershop Apprentice's Mounted photograph showing the apprentices in front of vessel No 568 (which became the "Blackburn" built for the Great Central Railway Company) surrounded by the tools of their trade. A slightly larger though less sharp version of this same image can be found at U DX363/1.
Harry Alba, Photographer
1 item

Sep 1910

Due to the fragile nature of the original item, a colour copy produced by overhead scanner will be produced

U DX363/3 Earle's Boilershop Employees Mounted photograph showing the employees in front of vessel No 569 (which became the "Bury" built for the Great Central Railway Company) surrounded by the tools of their trade
Harry Alba, Photographer
1 item

Sep 1910

Due to the fragile nature of the original item, a colour copy produced by overhead scanner will be produced