

U DX368

**Material relating to the
Ellerman Wilson Line and company**

c.1928-1989

Historical Background:

The firm of Thomas Wilson Sons & Co. (TWSC), later Ellerman's Wilson Line (EWL), was known for most of its life and now remembered as the Wilson Line. The activities of this single company helped to make Hull Britain's third largest port by the beginning of the twentieth century. In March 1904 TWSC owned some 99 vessels, most of which had been built by the local firm of Earle's Shipbuilding and Engineering Company Limited, which had itself been bought by TWSC shortly before.

Thomas Wilson, the founder of the firm, was born in Hull on 12 February 1792. He went to sea as a boy but then became a clerk with Whitaker, Wilkinson & Co., importers of Swedish iron ore, later becoming their commercial traveller in the Sheffield area. On 1 September 1814 he married Susannah John West and they eventually had 15 children. The story goes that, with a growing family, he asked his employers for a rise, was refused, and in 1820 chose to set up in business for himself, relying on various partners for the provision of capital. The first of these in 1822 was John Beckington, a merchant and iron importer from Newcastle. The firm of Beckington, Wilson & Co. started as ore importers based at Beckington's house at 14 Salthouse Lane, Hull. In 1825 two new partners joined: Thomas Hudson, another Newcastle merchant, and John Hudson, a druggist, of Hull. This was the effective starting point for the shipping company, as it was their capital which enabled the purchase of a ship, the 'Thomas & Ann', a 51.5 ton single-masted schooner. This vessel plied the Gothenburg-Hull iron ore route very successfully until it was sold in 1831. A second vessel, the 'Swift', was added in 1830. Beckington left the scene after 1834 and died about 1836. John Hudson's more prominent role was marked by the company being renamed Wilson, Hudson & Co., operating from Hudson's home at 31 Scale Lane.

In 1841 both the Hudsons withdrew from the firm and Wilson took his eldest son David (1815-93) as a partner in the renamed Thomas Wilson Son & Co. (becoming 'Sons' in about 1850 when Charles Henry and Arthur, the two youngest, joined). The firm now had 9 ships, operating mainly to the Baltic in the iron trade, but with interests also in timber and other goods and, from 1840, the mails for the United Kingdom, Sweden and Norway. New technology was quickly adopted, including new steam vessels, and in 1843 the long association with C. and W. Earle began with the construction of the 'North Sea'. On 1 December in the same year John West Wilson was sent to Gothenburg in Sweden to found a Wilson agency, which was subsequently heavily involved in the emigration trade to North America. TWSC also became Hull agents for the North of Europe Steam Navigation Company, operating several of their steamers to Scandinavian ports. When this company went out of business in 1860 much of its trade passed to TWSC.

Expansion followed in the 1850s, with the spread of services to Stettin, Riga, and St Petersburg. When Thomas Wilson died on 21 June 1869 aged 77, his firm had over 20 ships. Its management was now in the hands of Charles (aged 36) and Arthur (33) Wilson. David, the eldest son, had effectively withdrawn from the operation in about 1867, although he remained a shareholder until his death in February 1893. Under the stewardship of the Wilson brothers the firm grew even faster. During the 1860s and 1870s routes were opened to the Adriatic (to offset the loss of the Stettin trade during the Franco-Prussian War), Sicily, the Black Sea and India. TWSC's entry into the Adriatic and Mediterranean trades also marked the first use of the suffix 'o' in naming their vessels, beginning with the 'Tasso' in

Hull History Centre: Material relating to the Ellerman Wilson Line and company about 1870. Services to North America were started in 1875 and were quite successful. A joint service, known as the Wilson-Hill Line, between London and New York was operated with the Hill (or Twin Screw) Line from 1886. This service was continued until September 1896 when another joint venture, the short-lived Wilson's & Furness-Leyland Line (WFL) replaced it. TWSC sold its ships and interest in the WFL London-New York route to the Atlantic Transport Line a few years later. Meanwhile TWSC's fleet grew apace. In 1876 there were 43 steamers. To place this in context, of the 41 shipping firms in Hull in 1878, only five had more than 6 ships each. Two years later the old Hull firm of Brownlow, Marsdin & Company, with 7 vessels, was bought, along with the goodwill of its services to Hamburg, Antwerp and Dunkirk. In 1895 there were 93 ships (including 4 tugs). In 1903 the Bailey & Leatham Line (founded 1854) was bought with its 23 ships (built between 1867 and 1900) and services to Lisbon, St Petersburg, Königsberg, Copenhagen, Reval, Venice and other Mediterranean ports, at a price of £300,000. This was the high point of the Line, whose steamers had green hulls, and red funnels surmounted by a black band. The house flag was a pennant with white background and red ball.

In 1891 TWSC was registered as a limited liability concern, with nearly all the shares owned by Charles (the Chairman) and Arthur (his Deputy) Wilson. By this time both the brothers had made their mark in society as well as business. Charles Wilson (1833-1907) had married Florence Jane Helen Wellesley, daughter of Col. W.H.C. Wellesley, a descendant of the Duke of Wellington, in 1871. In 1878 he bought Warter Priory near Pocklington (with 300 acres) from Lord Muncaster. By the turn of the century he owned nearly 8000 acres, with an estate near Balmoral, a chalet in Nice, and a London home in Grosvenor Square. He was Liberal M.P. for Hull between 1874-1906, and was created Baron Nunburnholme of Kingston upon Hull in 1906. He died at Warter Priory on 27 October 1907, leaving an estate valued at nearly £1m, and three sons and four daughters.

He was succeeded as Chairman of TWSC by his younger brother, Arthur Wilson (1836-1909). Arthur, too, had established himself as an important society figure in the region. He bought land at Tranby near Hull and built a mansion, Tranby Croft, completed in 1876. He eventually owned some 3000 acres, was Master of the Holderness Hunt and Sheriff of Hull in 1888-89. The celebrated Baccarat Scandal and libel case occurred following alleged cheating by a member of the Prince of Wales' party whilst staying at Tranby Croft for the Doncaster St Leger races in September 1890. Wilson himself was untainted, however, becoming High Sheriff of Yorkshire in 1891. He eventually died of cancer on 21 October 1909. He had married Mary Emma Smith of Leeds in July 1863, and left three sons.

Business continued to prosper in the latter years of Charles' and Arthur's reign. Regional offices were established in Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and Birmingham. The United Shipping Company, based in London, was formed in partnership with Det Forenede Dampskibs-Selskab of Copenhagen to operate joint services from London to St Petersburg, Riga and Copenhagen. And in 1906 TWSC joined with the North Eastern Railway Company to operate services from Hull to Hamburg, Antwerp, Ghent and Dunkirk via the Wilson's & North-Eastern Railway Shipping Company (WNERSC). But all was not well within the Wilson dynasty, for the sons of Charles and Arthur were disinclined to participate in active management. Oswald Sanderson (1863-1926), a distant relative by marriage, was effectively head-hunted from his position as Manager of Sanderson & Son of New York, which acted as agents for the Wilsons and others. He moved to Hull as General Manager in January 1901, and was soon elected to the Board of Directors, becoming Managing Director in August 1905.

After the death of 'Mr Arthur' in October 1909 the job of Chairman passed to his son, E. Kenneth Wilson, while Charles Henry Wellesley Wilson, 2nd Lord Nunburnholme, became

Hull History Centre: Material relating to the Ellerman Wilson Line and company

Deputy Chairman. At the outbreak of the First World War there were still 92 vessels, of which 7 were operated by WNERSC. The reasons for the subsequent sudden decision to sell out to Sir John Reeves Ellerman have never been clear. Profits had recovered after an initial slump. Officially, it was said to be because of a shortage of suitable young men in the Wilson family. However, relations behind the scenes, particularly between Nunburnholme and Sanderson were very strained, and there were arguments from March 1916 onwards. It was only then that both Nunburnholme and Kenneth Wilson indicated their desire to get out of the business. Contacts, apparently initiated by Nunburnholme via Ernest Olivier, a shadowy go-between, were made with Ellerman, who was himself Hull-born, and a major shipowner, but with long-established interests in brewing, publishing and property. The deal was eventually concluded on 13th November 1916 - for a total of about £4.3m. Sanderson remained Managing Director.

Contrary to public promises made to the stunned people of Hull at the time, Ellerman promptly changed the name of the Company to Ellerman's Wilson Line (EWL) in January 1917. Things thereafter went from bad to worse. More vessels were lost, and then the Government took over the British mercantile marine for the rest of the War at comparatively low rates of charter hire. With enormously increased costs, particularly insurance, shipping companies made poor returns. As Sanderson wrote to one of his old colleagues, the Wilsons had sold at just the right time. Thus, although the acquisition of TWSC had made Ellerman the biggest shipowner in Britain with over 200 vessels, EWL alone lost 49 ships during the War.

Matters failed to improve thereafter, and by the end of 1922 Ellerman was asking his staff, including Sanderson, to take large cuts in salary. Sanderson's own position, and that of EWL, became increasingly uncomfortable. He explained the problem, and his proposed solution, in a letter to his son in New York, on 9 April 1925: the Wilson Line's activities were being severely constrained by Ellerman's other shipping operations so that, whereas previously there was healthy competition, EWL was now being directed to keep out of certain areas. Simultaneously, EWL's traditional concentration on Northern Europe and the Baltic had been badly hit by the Russian Revolution. Sanderson therefore proposed that he move his base to London to be at the heart of decision-making. Ellerman appears to have resisted this. Certainly, by the time of Sanderson's premature death aged 63 on Christmas Day, 1926, he was still based in Hull. Also, although attempts to find new outlets and restore old trades were made, these met with poor results. The Antwerp Steamship Company, for example, was taken over in October 1922, but remained dormant until July 1931. And the Polish-British Steamship Company, formed in partnership with the Polish Government in December 1928, made little headway against adverse trading conditions before 1939.

Ellerman died in July 1933, leaving a fortune estimated at between £37 and £40m (worth between £2.1bn and £2.3bn today). The second and last Baronet, also Sir John Reeves Ellerman, was then 23 and little known. His interests lay outside business, and he was a noted natural historian. He died after a heart attack in July 1973, leaving £52.3m, the largest fortune ever left in Britain at that time. Meanwhile, management of his companies was left entirely in the hands of others. In the case of EWL, these included H.S. Holden, J.W. Bayley, J.R. Fewlass and, lastly, Col. G.W. Bayley, who were successively Managing Directors and/or Chairmen, with Holden and J.W. Bayley also progressing to similar positions in Ellerman Lines itself.

World War II brought further heavy blows for EWL, with 26 of their 35 ships lost due to enemy action. A major post-war re-building programme eventually restored the fleet to some 26 vessels but EWL, in common with other British lines, was seriously affected by the growth of national shipping lines in newly independent countries such as India and Pakistan. By the early 1960s the remaining services to North America were abandoned as uneconomic.

Hull History Centre: Material relating to the Ellerman Wilson Line and company

Attempts to employ new technology, including roll-on roll-off ferries and container ships, met with some success. However, by December 1972 although EWL still employed about 300 clerical staff in Hull, there were just three ships remaining. In that year the Ellerman Group was totally reorganised into three divisions by its new Chairman, D. Martin-Jenkins. Ellerman City Liners (the Shipping Division of Ellerman Lines Ltd) was based in London and included the Mediterranean trades formerly operated by EWL. The bulk of EWL became the Transport Division of Ellerman Lines Ltd, based at Hull. The third division, in London, comprised Ellerman's other travel and leisure interests. This reorganisation was not a success. Ellerman Lines, including what was left of EWL, was subsequently bought by Trafalgar House, and subsumed within the Cunard Steamship Company Ltd, which it also owned. Ellerman Holdings Ltd, established in 1982 as a private investment company to continue the group's brewing and leisure interests, was subsequently bought by Brent Walker Group PLC. The connection with Hull was effectively severed in 1981, and it was at that stage that the bulk of the Wilson Line archive was placed in Hull University Library, after a much smaller collection had been deposited in 1976.

Custodial history:

Donated by Mrs P.M. Ruston, January 2012

Description:

This small collection contains various papers and other records relating to the Ellerman Wilson Line including photographs, correspondence and information booklets. There are photographs of the ships SS Spero, Hroak, Harrogate and the City of Port Elizabeth as well as several booklets and correspondence relating to Ellerman Wilson pension funds, assurance policies and superannuation schemes. There are also a number of items relating to the voyage of the City of Port Elizabeth from Middlesbrough on 22 May 1967.

Arrangement:

- U DX368/1 Photographs and Calendar Cards
- U DX368/2 Pension fund and other work papers of E.J. Hobson
- U DX368/3 Papers relating to Ellerman Wilson reorganisation and the payment of salaries
- U DX368/4 City of Port Elizabeth

Extent: 39 items

Related material:

Earle's Shipbuilding and Engineering Company [U DEA]

John Good & Sons Ltd. [U DGO]

Items relating to the 'Atlantic' Steamship [U DX/119]

Other repositories:

Artefacts, photographs and other Wilson Line ephemera, Hull Maritime Museum

Business correspondence and notebooks of Sir John Reeves Ellerman, 1911-1933, Glasgow University Archive Services

Access conditions: Access will be granted to any accredited reader

U DX368/1	Photographs and Calendar Cards Includes a group of photographs and postcards relating to the Ellerman Wilson Line, including photographs of the ships SS Spero, Hroak, Harrogate and the City of Port Elizabeth. There are also two calendar cards from 1972 and 1974. 8 items	c.1928-1989
U DX368/1/1	Photographs and postcards Includes a black and white group photograph of Hodgson and Harris staff at Wilson's (c.1928) with names; a sepia postcard of SS Spero in the Railway Dock, Hull (Aug 1937); a sepia postcard of the ships 'Hroak' and 'Harrogate' in the Railway Dock, Hull (Aug 1937); a black and white photographic postcard of the City of Port Elizabeth; a colour photograph of the Railway Dock Extension to the Hull Marina (24 Mar 1989) and a colour photograph of the Old Office, Railway Dock (24 Mar 1989). 6 items	c. 1928-1989
U DX368/1/2	Calendar cards Includes a calendar card with a colour photograph of a ferry from the Hull to Zeebrugge Wilson Line (1972) and a calendar card for EWL: The Transport Division of Ellerman Lines Ltd (1974). 2 items	1972-1974
U DX368/2	Pension fund and other work papers of E.J. Hobson Includes a pass card for Mr Hobson for carrying out his duties as a shipping clerk as well as various booklets, correspondence and other papers relating to Ellerman Wilson pension funds, assurance policies and superannuation schemes. 13 items	1933-1971
U DX368/2/1	Pass card of Mr E.J. Hobson Pass card for Mr Hobson to enable him to carry out his duties as a shipping clerk. Includes some biographical notes about Mr Hobson on post-its. 1 item	Mar 1940

Hull History Centre: Material relating to the Ellerman Wilson Line and company

U DX368/2/2	<p>Bundle of booklets relating to various Pension Fund policies</p> <p>Includes booklets entitled: Ellerman Scheme of Superannuation by Endowment Assurance: Rules and Conditions (n.d.); Ellerman's Wilson Line and Associated Companies Group: Rules of Staff Endowment Assurance Scheme (1 Jul 1938); The Ellerman & Wilson Staff Pension Fund: Trust Deed and Rules (1946); The Ellerman & Wilson Staff Pension Fund: Deed of Amendment of the Trust Deed and Rules of the Fund (28 Jan 1955); The Ellerman & Wilson Staff Pension Fund: Trust Deeds and Rules (1957) and Ellerman Group Staff Pension and Retirement Benefits Funds: Trust Deeds and Rules (1971).</p> <p>6 items</p>	c.1938-1971
U DX368/2/3	<p>Bundle of correspondence and other papers relating to life assurance and pension fund schemes</p> <p>Includes certificates relating to the Sun Life Assurance Society Policy of Ernest J. Hobson (1933-1947); the assurance policy of Ernest J. Hobson and attached policy rules (Jun 1938); correspondence relating to the assurance policy of Ernest J. Hobson (13-14 Jun 1938); an explanatory memorandum and attached correspondence relating to a new superannuation scheme organised by the Ellerman & Wilson Staff Pension Fund (28 Feb 1946); a leaflet on the National Insurance Act 1959 with extracts applicable to non contracted out employees (1959) as well as correspondence relating to Joint Life Pensions offered by the Ellerman and Wilson Staff Pension Fund (Aug 1960).</p> <p>6 items</p>	1933-1960
U DX368/3	<p>Papers relating to Ellerman Wilson reorganisation and the payment of salaries</p> <p>Includes a press release and circular about the reorganisation of Ellerman Lines Ltd during the early 1970s as well as circulars relating to the payment of employees' salaries.</p> <p>5 items</p>	1946-1974
U DX368/3/1	<p>Papers relating to Ellerman Wilson reorganisation</p> <p>Includes a press release concerning the group reorganisation of Ellerman Lines Ltd. (4 Dec 1972) and a circular about the group reorganisation of Ellerman Lines Ltd., in particular the Transport Division (Apr 1973).</p> <p>2 items</p>	1972-1973

Hull History Centre: Material relating to the Ellerman Wilson Line and company

U DX368/3/2	<p>Circulars relating to the payment of salaries Includes circulars relating to the payment of salaries during absence through sickness or injury (1946-1948); circulars relating to the payment of salaries (Feb-Mar 1968) and a circular about the Cost of Living Safeguard (Jun 1974). 3 items</p>	1946-1974
U DX368/4	<p>City of Port Elizabeth Includes a brochure for the Ellerman Fleet service between the UK and South Africa as well as several items relating to the voyage of the City of Port Elizabeth from Middlesbrough on 22 May 1967. 13 items</p>	1967
U DX368/4/1	<p>Ellerman Line brochure Brochure for the Ellerman fleet in service between the UK and South Africa, including the ships: City of Port Elizabeth, City of Exeter, City of York and City of Durham. 1 item</p>	n.d.
U DX368/4/2	<p>Bundle of papers relating to the voyage of the City of Port Elizabeth from Middlesbrough on 22 May 1967 Includes a group photograph of unidentified individuals taken in [Hamburg]; a list of passengers and officers also containing one handwritten postcard; a blank cabin baggage tag; two Ellerman [bumper] stickers; correspondence relating to the voyage; examples of breakfast, lunch and dinner menus and two menus for 'Dinner Adieu' on 28 May 1967 signed by some of the [passengers]. 12 items</p>	May 1967