

## **U DX417 Material relating to the vessels "Gay Corsair" and "Fort St James" of Ellerman's Wilson Line 1943-1945**

**Accession number:** 2023/05

**Historical Background/Biographical 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

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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.

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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 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.

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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. 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:** Originally owned by Robert Tanton, captain of the Gay Corsair. Transferred from Hull Museums, with permission of the depositor, where it had been placed as part of a larger deposit of material received from the son of the original owner.

**Description:** The collection contains a wages account book for the "Gay Corsair" blockade runner, April-May 1944, and a file for the "Fort St. James" detailing its voyages in the 1940s.

**Extent:** 2 items

**Related material:** Earle's Shipbuilding and Engineering Company [U DEA]  
Archives of Ellerman's Wilson Line [U DEW]  
John Good & Sons Ltd. [U DGO]  
Items relating to the 'Atlantic' Steamship [U DX119]  
Material relating to the Ellerman Wilson Line and company [U DX368]

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

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**Copyright:** Copyright holder not known

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U DX417/1	Master's Book with seamen's accounts of wages This item relates to the "Gay Corsair" blockade runner and includes the seaman's name, rating and pay for the period they were with the vessel. 1 item	19 April-15 May 1944
U DX417/2	File for "Fort St. James" detailing its voyages File containing reports of each voyage, including weather and sea conditions and ports visited. Includes voyages to North and South America; the Mediterranean; Africa; and Asia. 1 file	1943-1945