

ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES AT THURSO RIVER HARBOUR 1922 by G. Watson

Recently I had the opportunity of studying three small notebooks which record details of vessels using Thurso rivermouth from 1922 to 1935. An analysis of all the entries was not possible but a look at the first recorded year from 8/7/22 shows, as might be expected, that over 50% of the entries refer to three boats, the Balone Castle, Castle Varich and the Dunvedin which traded along the North coast mainly to Tongue and Loch Eribol.

Usually they arrived in Thurso light, carrying only small quantities of eggs, skins, hides and on one occasion bags of winkles. They left carrying general cargo and coal. In season they brought loads of wool to Thurso. A few Orkney boats arrived bringing Hut Material, presumably ex-Navy huts from Scapa. They invariably returned to Orkney with a cargo of slates.

Seven colliers arrived during the year, bringing a total of 1339 tons 12 cwts of coal for local coal-merchants and the gas-works. The colliers left empty only the Thursonian managed a cargo of pavement to Newcastle.

A selection of entries from the note-book shows clearly the wealth of information preserved in it.

Dunvedin arrived, light from Naver, Sailed 10/7/22 with 30 qrs barley for Scapa Orkney, from M. Houston The Mill. Paid boat dues 7/7.

There is an excellent photograph of this vessel lying at the mouth of the Naver in 'Scottish Sail' page 51, in which she is said to be a 48ft. fife converted to gaff rig for trading and that she sometimes traded to Ireland with slates. She entered Thurso Harbour ten times in the year 1922-3, and her most distant ports were Loch Roag on Lewis and Ullapool. When she used the harbour on 31/8/22 in addition to boat dues she paid 6d. light dues. This is the first mention of Light Dues and this particular bill was paid by the Board of Agriculture, but when the Dunvedin returned on 5/10/22 the entry shows "Paid boats dues 7/7 wont paid light dues, he says under the regt tonnage". The Dunvedin continually refused to pay light dues. The light must have been brought into operation after the visit of SS Tynesider (who arrived on 24/8/22 and departed on 29/8/22) and the arrival of the Dunvedin on 31/8/22.

Balone Castle arrived 11/7/22, light with 7 boxes eggs for J. A. McKay. Paid 9d Also 3cwt skins. Paid 1/- Sailed 17/7/22 with general carrgoe for Tongue and Locheribol etc. Paid boat dues 9/4 on 21 tons regt. Paid 11/7 shores dues on goods. Capt. A. Gow. Paid in all 20/11.

The Balone Castle was another converted fife, she paid nine visits to Thurso during the year. A photograph of the vessel is given in "Scottish Sail" page 51. The above entry shows that landing dues were charged on goods held on the quay.

Emilly Barret arrived 24/7/22 with 114 tons coal for Co op from Sunderland. Sailed 3/8/22 in ballast for Port Madoc Wales. Paid vessels dues 25/10 on 58 tons regt. Also paid pilotage 21/4. Master Wm Green.

Wave Queen arrived 10/8/22 with 234 tons coal from Blyth for J. R. Riddel & Sons Coal Merchants. Sailed 12/8/22 light with 56 tons coals for Wick. Master (blank). Paid vessels dues etc per cheque £10:1:6. Paid 6d commission on cheque. 2/9/22 paid in office.

The entries for these two colliers show that local pilots were provided to guide strangers through the difficult harbour entrance, and that not all transactions were in cash. The gross disparity between the registered tonnage, which was calculated by a formula which was supposed to represent the carrying capacity of the vessel, and the actual weight of the cargo is clearly shown. Dues of any kind were based on the smaller registered tonnage.

SS Tynesider arrived 24/8/22 with 151 tons 6 cwt 3 qrs oilcake. From Hull. Sailed light 29/8/22 for Nairn. Paid vessels dues 32/- also paid pilotage on 72 tons regt. Master name Howard.

Balone Castle arrived 7/9/22, from Tongue with 66 bags wool, weight 4 ton 6 cwt including 12½ cwt of crofter's wool. James Rice 5 bags ditto, weight 8¾ cwt. Paid in all 28/10. Sailed with 29 ton coals and small quantity goods. Paid boats dues 9/4. 11 for sugar. 7d. light dues. 23/9/22.

One of the few inward cargoes from the West. The sugar transaction shows that the harbour authorities also supplied ships stores in a small way.

SS Hoy Head arrived 8/9/22 with about 3 tons of an heating apparatus for J. S Swanson, Painter, also 5 sheep for Wm MacKenzie cattle dealer, Castletown. Sailed 9/9/22 for Orkney with 3000 slates and 8 yds hammered edge pavement. Paid vessels dues on 22 ton regt 9/10, light dues 7½ d. Masters name Swanson.

The SS Hoy Head plied the south Orkney isles for sixty years from 1896 to 1956, under various owners, at the time of this entry she was owned by Swanson and Towers. She was built by T B Seath Fisher & Co at Rutherglen, she measured 72ft long by 14ft beam with a 7ft draught and a gross tonnage of 50. She was powered by a 16 horsepower steam engine. A photograph of this durable vessel is included in "Days of Orkney Steam". Her inward cargo of heating apparatus is intriguing.

Hope WK 780, fishing, 19/9/22 Masters name Hugh Malcolm.

No dues are recorded against this local boat, in contrast to

Boys Jacob 326 BK, arrived 19/1/23. Paid calling in dues 3/4d. Sailed 24/1/23.

Fishing boats do not figure prominently in the notebooks.

Hossanha arrived 3/2/23 with 198 tons coals for Coop. Name changes to Thursonian. Sailed 2/4/23 for Newcastle with pavement from Thursoeast. Paid dues and pilotage.

The Hossanha was a three masted topsail schooner which had traded under the Danish flag to Newfoundland and Labrador. As the Thursonian she was the last Thurso owned sailing ship. There is a remarkable photograph in "Scottish Sail" showing the wreck of the Thursonian on the Norfolk

coast in December 1928.

The Thursonian also features in an entry, which is just outside the year covered by this article, but which is included to show the meticulous nature of the author of the note-books.

Thursonian arrived 27/1/23 with coals for Coop 204 tons. Received half pilotage 17/8 paid pilots, also Harbour Master's fee 1/8 paid. Lying up at present for winter.

Sailed 27/3/26 light in ballast for Lochinver. Paid dues.

He was able to go back over 2½ years and record the sailing information on the same page as the arrival.

Royal Exchange arrived 20/3/23 from Orkney. Sailed 29/3/23 with 4000 slates from the Flagstone Coy. Paid dues 13/4 on 30 tons regt. also light dues 10d. Master name Gray, old man.

Castle Varrich arrived 26/3/23 light from Talmine. Sailed 30/3/23 with general cargoe for Tongue etc. Paid balance of last trips dues. To pay for this trip yet.

The Castle Varrich visited Thurso six times during the year. Her inability to settle her full dues was not uncommon or special to her. Carrying over dues to the following trip was normal especially if the vessel arrived light and had had no payment for cargo.

SS Sweet Home arrived 14/4/23 from Leith with cargo of manure for B Calder CastleHill. Sailed light for Scrabster to bunker. Paid vessels dues 30/8. Light dues 1/11.

There's a touch of humour in naming a manure ship "Sweet Home". She was back again with a further 155 tons on 2/6/23. It is interesting that she went to Scrabster to bunker, which would involve extra harbour dues. Presumably stocks of bunker coal were not kept at Thurso because the larger colliers could not enter the river.

SS Cormorant arrived 14/7/23 light from Tongue.

Sailed 15/7/23 with 3900 slates from Thurso east

Works for Kirkwall. Paid steamers dues, 19 ton regt, 8/6 light dues 6½. R. Muir master.

A full description of this vessel's adventures on land and sea is given in "Days of Orkney Steam". She was built at Berwick in 1885 and was finally broken up at Burray in 1938. She was 55 Gross tonnage, 71ft long by 17ft beam with an 8ft draught and driven by a 10 horsepower steam engine. Her normal run in 1923 was from Orkney to Loch Broom, supplying shops on the North and West Coast.

Windwick arrived 28/7/23 from Orkney with 8 tons sawing sand for Thursoeast Pavement Works.

Sailed 31/7/23 with slates and 1 load wood

G. Durran & Sons. Paid boats dues on 21 ton regt 9/4 also light dues 7d.

Although the pavement trade was declining at this date, it is interesting that good quality sharp sand was still being imported from Orkney, in preference to local sands, which must have been cheaper.

Thurso River Harbour has never been a good trading harbour, nevertheless, between 8/7/23 and 28/7/23 it was used by 19 trading vessel on 48 occasions. The largest was the timber ship Nathalie of 142 tons registered. It has not been possible to calculate the revenue from these visits as the dues were not always recorded in cash terms.

The coming of road transport and improved roads destroyed coastal shipping along the North Coast, and the decline of the pavement works ensured the end of the River-mouth as Thurso's harbour. It is fortunate indeed that these note-books have survived to give a glimpse of a bygone transport system

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: I am indebted to Mr. I. Sinclair, Thurso, for allowing me to study the note-books and to use extracts from them.

R E F E R E N C E S

R. SIMPER Scottish Sail David & Charles 1974

A. & A. CORMACK Days of Orkney Steam Kirkwall Press 1971

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