

1835 and all that.....

170 years ago this year, a group of London and local businessmen, having noted the rapid growth of trade passing through the Town Quay and The Platform - and the attempts by both the London & South Western Railway Company and the Great Western Railway Company to connect Southampton with London - formed themselves into the Southampton Dock Company.

They engaged an Engineer by the name of Francis Giles to undertake a survey of the Western Mudlands (the coastline between Town Quay and Ocean Village) with a view to constructing a commercial dock. He dutifully reported it "expedient to construct a Dock, Wharves and Sheds for the accommodation of trade and shipping."

Francis Giles was immediately appointed Company Engineer by the Dock Company Provisional London Sub-Committee and began to prepare a series of plans. At the same time, the Company promoted a Bill in Parliament to obtain the necessary powers to develop the mudlands and on 19th May 1836 His Majesty King George III gave Royal Assent to "an Act for making and maintaining a Dock or Docks at Southampton."

The preamble to the 1836 Act noted that the commercial activity of Southampton had significantly increased since the London & South Western Railway Company had completed a direct rail link from London and that it "would be of great public utility if a Dock or Docks were made, constructed and maintained on the mudlands at the confluence of the Southampton Water and the River Itchen."

The 1836 Act recognised the Southampton Dock Company as a "Body Corporate" and empowered them to raise a Capital of £350,000 in shares of £50 each. Interestingly, the Town Council cut a deal to permit the compulsory purchase of the Canute Road and Platform Road water frontages in their ownership, in lieu of shares in the new Company.

The first General Meeting of the Proprietors of the Southampton Dock Company took place at the George & Vulture Tavern, Lombard Street, London on Tuesday 16th August 1836.

Nine nominated Directors and 37 seven Proprietors were present. Francis Giles was also present at the meeting and was formally appointed Docks Engineer. Acting Chairman Richard Heathfield opened the meeting but the Directors subsequently resolved to appoint one Joseph Liggins Esquire as the Company's first Chairman. There is an oil painting of the said Mr Liggins on the 3rd Floor of Ocean Gate, ABP Southampton's Port Office.

As mentioned above, in 1835 the Southampton Dock Company appointed Francis Giles as their first Company Engineer. Having been confirmed in post at the 1836 General Meeting, he immediately began preparations to construct the Outer Dock (now Ocean Village). Amid much Masonic pomp and pageantry, the foundation stone was laid in 1838. The original location is open to question but as far as can be ascertained, the stone was laid approximately 50 metres west of Admiralty House (the old Post Office building adjacent to Dock Gate 4. It was recovered many years ago and is now on display in the Eastern Docks.

This event coincided with Francis appointing his son, Alfred as his apprentice. Later, Francis was asked to relocate to the Company's London Office, while Alfred took over as Resident Engineer at Southampton.

Sadly, Francis died in 1846 and Alfred became Company Engineer. Alfred rather reluctantly had to relocate to London but he nevertheless worked tirelessly for the Dock Company and oversaw the formal opening of the Outer Dock (1843), the Inner Dock (1851), the first four dry docks, the upper Itchen Quays (1875) and the opening of the Empress Dock in 1890.

Despite his best efforts to relocate back to Southampton, the Board insisted that Alfred should remain in London so in order to maintain continuity in 1870 he apprenticed his son, George. By 1890, George was well versed in all the Docks' activities and as Alfred was by this time well over 70, he wrote to the Directors asking if George could act as joint Company Engineer. This was agreed.

However, the next two or three years proved to be traumatic. Following the significant cost of constructing the Empress Dock, the Southampton Dock Company found itself short of working capital and the London & South Western Railway made strong overtures to take over the Dock Company (by this time several SDC Directors were also Directors of the L&SWR so were well aware of their financial situation) and in 1891 a Parliamentary Bill was raised to complete the takeover. The resultant Southampton Docks Act took effect on 31st October 1892 - the day old Alfred retired. The Docks had been acquired by the L&SWR for the princely sum of £1,360,000.

The small print of the Act was rather unfortunate because Alfred was obliged to appeal to the new Board, to agree his retirement package – indeed, there was no guarantee that a pension of any description would be forthcoming. His letter to the L&SWR Board was recorded in the Minutes. Alfred stated he had worked diligently for the Southampton Dock Company for over 54 years and he felt justified in asking for a retirement annuity of £10,000. The 2nd March 1893 Minutes recorded that the matter of his annuity was fully discussed and it was resolved that "after full consideration of the foregoing claim, the sum of £3,000 be awarded" to him. Not quite what he wanted but then again, he was 76 and he was, after all, dealing with the Directors of a port undertaking!

Grandson George was asked to remain in his post and he continued his career with the L&SWR for many years to come, overseeing the construction of the lower Itchen Quays, the fifth (Prince of Wales) dry dock, the Test Quays and last but not least, the opening of the White Star (Ocean) Dock in 1911.

That represented a combined unbroken service of well over a century, by three generations of the same family – quite a legacy.

(Ron Hancock)