

HISTORY OF

CASTLES SHIPBREAKING

INTRODUCTION

The authors are researchers of the commercial history of Castles Shipbreaking and the relative Castle family connections over the years from the early 1800s onwards and up to 1958. The history is also based on the authors' own family association with the Company over a period of forty six years between 1958 and 2004.

Whilst running and owning a successful manufacturing company, which had diversified into the manufacture of built-in kitchen cabinets and built-in furniture for trade and retail customers and which is still in existence today, it became abundantly clear from the various archives in the authors' possession that there was a major story to tell. Whilst the authors cannot lay claim to any specialised knowledge of history or of maritime matters, in particular, they have recorded as accurately as they can the developments of an interesting and unique family business, the story of which deserves to be made accessible to the general public.

Initially, research work was undertaken by Burkes Peerage and subsequently by the University of Plymouth, principally utilising the services of a postgraduate-student, Julia Sargent, to work with the company and also to research the history on our behalf. A substantial and significant result was achieved from this work and the authors express their sincere thanks to Julia Sargent for the considerable amount of time and effort spent on undertaking this early stage of the history project. Where appropriate we have quoted from the many reports written by Julia and in some instances we have also utilised information prepared in conjunction with the University, where we had made available the source documentation from our Archives.

Over the succeeding years a huge amount of additional information has been forthcoming to the authors. In particular, the creation of a Castles Shipbreaking website in 2006 www.castlesshipbreaking.co.uk has been instrumental in creating a significant number of new contacts, which have been very helpful in providing valuable detail about the Company and its products. The number of enquiries regarding Castles furniture still owned by many people has been rewarding. It became clear that many artefacts dating back to the early part of the 20th century and even prior to 1900 are still in existence today and clearly valued by their owners.

This book will therefore present the findings to date of the business history of the various Castles companies concerned, covering their evolution from a shipbreaking concern established in 1838 on the River Thames through to its relocation to Plymouth, Devon in the 1930s. The history of Castles, whose origins lie firmly in the activity of scrapping obsolete wooden vessels, provides an insight into the shipbreaking industry and highlights many of the factors which influenced its development during the nineteenth century.

The 1933 catalogue of Castles Shipbreaking suggests a much earlier connection dating back as far as 1666, when a William Castle built the fourth *Defiance* for King Charles II at Rotherhithe. This part of the Castles story is described initially in some detail as the Shipbreaking Company owners firmly believed that their Castle family was directly descended from William Castle. It was also a challenge to attempt to try and link the family pedigrees in such a way that the connections claimed could be validated.

The Castle business begins with the establishment of George Castle's ship repairing yard in Rotherhithe about 1808 through to the formation of the Henry Castle sole proprietorship in 1838. The history then covers the evolution of the family shipbreaking business between 1838 and 1906, from then until 1942 and onwards to the present day.

The transition from wood to iron and steel in the construction of warships in the mid-1800s created significant changes in the shipbreaking industry and the way in which the firm

Henry Castle & Sons developed during this period is discussed in detail. It is one of the great recycling stories of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The research has been very varied and a wide range of material has been drawn upon. Castles' own records were largely destroyed during Second World War bombings of their London headquarters at Baltic Wharf Millbank and of their Plymouth site in Cattedown. Subsequently a factory fire at Cattedown in 1965 destroyed many of the remaining Company archives. Therefore, much of the data about the Company has had to be established indirectly from other sources. However, a substantial archive of varied company material has been recovered and these are referred to in the ensuing pages as and when appropriate. In the absence of published statistics regarding the shipbreaking industry, J.J. Colledge's *Ships of the Royal Navy* has been a key source of information.

Furthermore, information recorded by the daughter of Charles F. Perry, whose childhood had been spent at Long's Wharf, Woolwich, where her father was the manager of two of Castles shipbreaking yards from 1885 to 1905, has been kindly passed on by her family and has provided a useful insight into the company's day-to-day operations during that period.

Limitations in the scope of the research arose due to the lack of continuity in terms of the records which have survived. The destruction of records by both Companies House and the Public Record Office has clearly limited the potential in this area. Furthermore, problems have arisen where important facts are only based on anecdotal evidence and many writers of articles about the company and its employees have repeated this evidence without acknowledging the source. It therefore became increasingly difficult to prove the validity of the information.

Yet despite the difficulties inherent in historical research of this nature, a great deal of information has been discovered which has been used to compile this business history to date. At the same time, through its investigation of the shipbreaking industry, the research so far has contributed to the knowledge of what is at present a little studied field of maritime research.

Generally, the mass of information at our disposal has varied in its content in so far as it applies to specific events and periods during the historic time span covered. There are long periods where only outline information is available for particular years whilst for others there are literally dozens of pages of detailed information that can be accessed. Much to our surprise a wealth of detail regarding Henry Castle's activities in Sydney, Australia, prior to 1838 have come to light and they have been included because of their unique interest to many of our established contacts and especially to the Castle family.

As the time and resources required to research the core needs of the project are considerable and bearing in mind that this book is concerned largely with the commercial history of the Castle family's involvement in shipbreaking activities, the authors have reluctantly decided that we should keep to this line of approach, at least in the initial publication. We have therefore described the activities in chronological order incorporating anecdotal evidence as well as historic fact. Over many years of reading and absorbing the details concerned one develops an instinctive ability to focus on the most likely outcome and direction of events involved. Consequently, this adds a degree of assumption which will stimulate the reader's appetite and possible willingness to contribute further information or evidence to corroborate or dispute some or any of the conclusions arrived at. We therefore leave it to others to judge the situation accordingly.

References to family activities outside the field of shipbreaking have nonetheless been introduced mainly to give a flavour of the personality of the underlying individuals involved over the years and of their relatives. Several individuals other than Castle family members played a crucial role in the development of the business and their contribution has therefore been described in appropriate terms where necessary.

There are many Castle family relatives scattered across the globe, particularly in Australia and New Zealand, and we have welcomed the enthusiastic contribution from those relatives who have contacted us. It has greatly enhanced our understanding of the depth and breadth of the connections involved. In addition, third party contacts in both of these

countries have also helped us considerably where knowledge of important working partners of the Castle shipbreaking family had previously been lacking.

The wooden sailing ships of course stimulate many a tar's memories as the names of ships survive and are resurrected through successor vessels. In addition, those who served on them will recognise the important contribution a study of ships' figureheads can make to the important subject of maritime history. In this connection, we have worked together with well-known figurehead historians in order to highlight the fascinating story behind the many figureheads that passed through the hands of the Castle companies.

We hope you enjoy the story and let us know what you feel about it. All contributions to this unique history will be warmly welcomed, as further research over time will certainly add substance and a greater understanding of the lives and activities of these characters of a bygone age.