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The speculatively-built ships of Oswald, Mordaunt and Company,  
1879-84: *Woolston, Bitterne, Test, Itchen and Netley*

The steamship *Bitterne* had only a short life in the 1880s but it holds a place in Southampton's maritime history as the largest ship built in the yard at Woolston created in 1875-6 by Thomas Ridley Oswald, who pioneered large-scale iron shipbuilding there until his departure in 1889. At 5,085 tons, the *Bitterne* was also the largest vessel of its time to enter the port of London.

Her builder was a man of experience and enterprise. Born at Stepney in 1836, he began his apprenticeship in the yard of his uncle, the Sunderland shipbuilder James Laing, and then worked for Scott Russell at Millwall on Brunel's *Great Eastern* before returning to Sunderland in his early twenties to establish his own shipyard and iron works at Pallion.

Between 1859 and 1875 Oswald launched 149 iron ships, mostly sailing vessels of around 1,000 tons for bulk cargo carrying but including some steamships of 2,000+ tons, for which he also constructed the boilers and engines.

To expand his activities (and probably also to escape some of his creditors, for he had over-reached himself financially) Oswald moved his operations and most of his workforce from Wearside to Woolston, where previously only small-scale boat building had been undertaken on the east bank of the Itchen.

The first vessel completed in his new yard in 1876 was the *Aberfoyle*, a barque of 953 tons, using iron frames already made up and brought down from Sunderland.

Late in 1877 Oswald found an unlikely partner in John Murray Mordaunt, a sporting gentleman from an old Warwickshire family who doubtless contributed useful capital to the business, which was thenceforth styled Oswald, Mordaunt and Company. Mordaunt actively identified himself with it, coming to live at 'Middanbury Lodge' all through the 1880s.

T R Oswald, a member of the Institution of Naval Architects from 1869, acknowledged the contribution of his brother William Rudd Oswald as manager of the shipbuilding works during its first four years. He lived at Charlton Lodge in Weston Grove Road. The Southampton directory of 1883 listed 'Hercules Linton, marine architect, Prospect Villa, Obelisk Road, Woolston.' The designer of the celebrated clipper *Cutty Sark* made his skilled input to the styling and construction of some of the 104 vessels built at Woolston in 1876-89 – over 70 of which were three-masted full-rigged iron sailing ships of around 2,000 tons intended for world-wide service as economical carriers of bulk cargoes such as

coal, grain, lumber and wool, in the period when sail could still undercut steam for long-haul voyages.

Some of these sturdy Woolston-built windjammers were remarkably long-lasting, most notably the 2,170 ton *Wavertree*, which reached her centenary in

1985, lovingly restored as a showpiece of South Street Seaport Museum, New York.

T R Oswald himself made his home in Southampton, taking a lease of New Place House, an early Georgian town mansion at the foot of Bedford Place. (Subject of a detailed account in the *Journal of the Southampton Local History Forum* no.10, Spring 2003, this was demolished to provide the site for Southampton's first purpose-built public library, opened in July 1893 – bombed in 1940, replaced by modern offices in 1988).

The 1881 census recorded Oswald, then 44, living there with his second wife Wilhelmina (29) and their three young children aged 1 to 4. Oswald's first wife had died in 1872, at only 27. The Oswalds were attended by five resident female servants. If Oswald kept his own carriage, his coachman was not then living-in at New Place House; Oswald may have hired horse cabs to take him to and from the Floating Bridge across to Woolston.

The census enumerator described him as 'shipbuilder and engineer (1,200 men)'; White's Hampshire directory of 1878 noted that his yard occupied 20 acres and 'in full work employs 1,000 hands; all the details for the vessels and their engines are made on the premises.'

A statement contributed to the port authority's review in 1882 listed the ships built at Woolston up to August that year – 24 sailing vessels with a total tonnage of 40,920 and 15 steam ships totalling 23,763 tons. Then under construction were 11 more vessels – five sailing ships aggregating to 10,307 tons and six steamers totalling 16,400 tons. The latter included the two largest built at Oswald's yard.

Most of its output was directed to meeting the orders of shipowners, mainly Liverpool companies with whom Oswald had earned a good reputation. At times when such orders were not sufficient to keep his yard in full operation Oswald maintained its productive capacity and skilled workforce by himself undertaking speculative building on his own account, expecting soon to sell or charter such vessels. When found new commercial owners they were appropriately renamed but initially Oswald gave them distinctive local names – *Woolston*, *Bitterne*, *Test*, *Itchen* and *Netley*.

#### *Woolston and Bitterne*

The *Southampton Times* of 13 May 1882 carried an account of the launching at Woolston the previous Saturday, 6 May, of 'a large screw steamer of 4,500 tons named the *Woolston* ... length 385 ft, breadth 44 ft ... engines made by the same firm ... intended to take the highest class at Lloyds. The ceremony of naming the vessel was performed by Mrs T R Oswald' (figure 1).

The *Woolston* was never listed as such by Lloyds. Its 1883 register showed that her builder had soon found a purchaser for the steamer more exactly assessed at 4,252 tons – the *Compania General de Tabacos de Filipinas*, a Barcelona-based company which renamed her *Isla de Luzon*. She was later

**LAUNCH AT SOUTHAMPTON.**—On Saturday last, Messrs. Oswald, Mordaunt, and Co., launched from their ship-building and engineering works, Southampton, a large screw steamer of 4,500 tons, named the *Woolston*, of the following dimensions, viz. :—Length, 385ft. ; breadth, 44ft. ; depth of hold, 32ft. The ship is built with top-gallant forecastle, long bridge, and cape aft. She is fitted with Emerson and Walker's patent windlass for lifting anchors and all the latest improvements. The engines, which are made by the same firm, are on the compound principle, having cylinders 52ft. by 94ft., and a stroke of 60ft. She has four double ended boilers with a working pressure of 90lbs., and a total heating surface of 12,500ft. She is also fitted with an auxilliary boiler which can be used for the main engines or steam winches as required. The ship and engines are intended to take the highest class at Lloyd's. The ceremony of naming the vessel was performed by Mrs. T. R. Oswald.

Figure 1. *Southampton Times*, 13 May 1882. Report of the launching of the *Woolston* on 6 May. All reports of such launchings follow an established pattern, evidently set by the publicity accounts provided by the company.

transferred to another Barcelona company, the *Compania Transatlantica*, adding a further chapter to her long-distance cargo-carrying. She continued in seemingly uneventful service until withdrawn about 1910.

Much shorter was the sea-going career of the 'fine large screw steamer of 4,800 tons' named the *Bitterne* at her launching on 9 June 1883, when 'the ceremony was performed by Miss Mordaunt of Midanbury, Southampton.' She was one of the daughters of J M Mordaunt, probably the eldest, Mabel Louise, then 14 (figure 2).

Figure 2. *Southampton Times*, 16 June 1883. Report of the launching of the *Bitterne* on 9 June 1883. Her name is curiously printed as 'Bittern', i.e. the reedbed bird of the heron family rather than the place. Several unconnected ships carried the name *Bittern* but there was only one named *Bitterne*.

**SHIP LAUNCH AT SOUTHAMPTON.**—On Saturday Messrs. Oswald, Mordaunt, and Co., launched from their shipbuilding and engineering works, Southampton, a fine large screw steamer of 4,800 tons, named the *Bittern*, of the following dimensions :—Length (extreme), 395ft. ; breadth, 44ft. 3in. ; depth of hold, 33ft. The ship is built with top-gallant forecastle, long bridge, and large poop aft. She is fitted with Emmerson and Walker's patent capstan windlass for lifting anchors, and all the latest improvements. The engines by the same firm are on the compound principle of 3,000 indicated horse-power, having cylinders of 46 and 90, and a stroke of 60. She has two double-ended main boilers, with a working pressure of 100lbs. The ship and engines are intended to take the highest class at Lloyd's. The ceremony of naming the vessel was performed by Miss Mordaunt, of Midanbury, Southampton.

In 1885-6 Lloyds listed T R Oswald as the owner of the *Bitterne*, giving her tonnage as 5,085 tons and dimensions as 382 x 44 ft, with nominal accommodation for 50 first class and 1,350 steerage passengers, the latter in the holds intended primarily for cargo. Oswald had chartered her to the recently established Liverpool company styled the 'Twin Screw Line' (although she was, of course, a single screw steamer, making 13 knots).

The *Bitterne* made her maiden voyage from London to New York for this company on 27 June 1884 and completed seven round voyages across the Atlantic by November 1885 before being sold to the Palermo shipowner Michel Amoroso.

Renamed *Robilant*, she sailed for him under the Italian flag but still operated out of London, making five round voyages to New York between December 1886 and August 1887. She was recorded sailing from Italian ports to New York in February 1888, with 1,324 steerage passengers. Thereafter the *Robilant* carried cargoes to South America, Java and New York. From there she set off on the last day of 1889 for China and Japan but on 6 February 1890 she was lost near the Cape of Good Hope. The *Times* of 8 February reported Lloyds agent at Cape Town telegraphing that this ship had been totally lost in Saldanha Bay, with little prospect of salvage. Fortunately, all her crew were saved.

### *Test and Itchen*

Launched in July 1883 (according to Lloyds – no local press report has yet been located) a lesser steamship than the *Bitterne* enjoyed a much longer career under several different names. Originally called the *Test*, this 2,600 ton iron steamer, 310 x 39 ft, was listed at Lloyds in 1884 under the ownership of T R Oswald, registered at Liverpool, where he was presumably seeking to charter or sell her.

In 1885 he found a purchaser – the Liverpool, Brazil and River Plate Steam Navigation Co Ltd, which promptly changed her name from *Test* to *Caxton*, ahead of her maiden voyage from Liverpool to the River Plate in June 1885. Oswald built another three similar steamships for the Lambert & Holt company in 1885-8. After ten years in its service, the *Caxton* was sold in 1895 to T Hogan & Sons, who renamed her *Mendota*.

In 1908 the one-time *Test* was given another new identity as the *Angiolina*, having been bought by the Italian shipowner Cesare Parodi of Genoa. In 1905 he sold her to another operator, who renamed her in grander style as *Citta di New York*. She made her first voyage from Italy to New York in March 1905, carrying 31 cabin and 951 steerage passengers, but after three such round trips she was withdrawn and sold in 1907 to another Italian company, the Societa Marittima La Platense, for general cargo-carrying – with yet another change of name, to *Costanza*.

Her career ended during World War I, when she was bound from Tyneside to Leghorn with a cargo of coal and was torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine in the North Sea off the British coast on 14 August 1917.

In its issue of 27 September 1884 the *Southampton Times* reprinted a paragraph from its London contemporary praising the Woolston shipbuilders for speedily undertaking a Government contract for 70 special boats designed for use on the Nile in the intended expedition to relieve the siege of Khartoum and rescue General Gordon – which was unfortunately overtaken by events.

Flanking it in the adjoining column was a report neatly headed 'Launch of the *Itchen* at Southampton', recording in the usual style the launching from the

Woolston Shipbuilding and Engineering Works on 20 September of 'a fine iron sailing ship of 1,500 tons ... length 251 ft, breadth 38 ft ... built to class A1 at Lloyds ... having full poop for the accommodation of captain and officers, large deck house amidships for crew, petty offices, galley etc ... and Emerson & Walker's windlass for working anchors.'

The *Itchen*, seemingly not accorded a formal naming ceremony at her launching, was acquired by the Liverpool shipowner R J Swyny, who renamed her *County of Clare*. In 1899 the owner was listed as Miss T Swyny, presumably following her father's death. This prompted her to dispose of the ship, which was sold in 1900 to N Panelius of Rauma, the port in Finland, then ruled by Russia. Renamed *Sylfid*, she continued to be listed under Russian ownership there until the early 1920s.

### *Netley*

Completing the quintet of Oswald's spec-built vessels – chronologically the first and by far the shortest-lived – was the 2,500 ton steamer built in 1879 as the *Netley* but restyled *Hansa* on being bought by the Norddeutscher Lloyd company of Bremen. It doubtless had regard to Oswald's yard at Sunderland having built five steamers of 1,900 – 2,500 tons in 1871-3 for the Baltischer Lloyd company. Some of these eventually had working lives of 30+ years but the *Netley/Hansa* had a sadly brief time afloat.

The second of that name in the NDL fleet, the *Hansa* was its first purely cargo-carrying ocean steamship. She left Bremen on her maiden voyage to New York on 25 November 1879 but never completed a return voyage, being wrecked on 4 January 1880 on Terschelling Island, off the Dutch coast – fortunately without loss of life.

In part payment for this ill-fated new *Hansa*, Oswald had taken the previous bearer of that name in the NDL fleet, a 3,000 ton steamer built in 1861 by Caird & Co at Greenock. This was overhauled and fitted with new engines and boilers, then sold in 1881 to a Liverpool shipowner R Gibbs. Two years later he sold her to the White Cross Line of Antwerp, which renamed her *Ludwig*.

The *Southampton Times* recalled her history when reporting her arrival on 18 June 1883 with a large cargo of cattle and sheep from Canada. She sailed again from Antwerp for Montreal on 2 July that year ... only to disappear *en route* without trace, involving the loss of 70-80 lives.

### *Solent*

Not in the same category as the foregoing five Oswald-built vessels but worth a brief mention is the *Solent*, launched in September 1878 to the order of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company. This 1908 ton schooner-rigged steamer was designed for the Royal Mail inter-island service in the Caribbean, based at Barbados.

Withdrawn from this duty in 1905, she was given a new role – with smartly painted white hull – as the first Royal Mail vessel wholly engaged in cruising in

and around the West Indies. Her last duties were more prosaic, carrying labourers to work on the Panama Canal, before being sent back to Britain in 1909 for breaking up.

#### Final years

Oswald, Mordaunt & Co got into financial difficulties in the late 1880s, leading to the closure of their Woolston yard in April 1889 and the dissolution of the company. It seems that Oswald's engineering skills and organisational enterprise were not always matched by commercial acumen and prudent business management.

Oswald then moved his operations to Milford Haven, where he took over an unoccupied yard and resumed shipbuilding and repair work on his own account, until retiring in 1895.

He spent his later years at Blackheath, Kent, as tenant of a house in Beaconsfield Road called 'Riverview' – the Thames could indeed be seen from its upper floor. There he died on 22 June 1916, a week short of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. By his will made a few days previously he left all his property to his 'dear wife Wilhelmina'; for probate his total effects were valued at precisely £213.17s.7d. – a very modest legacy from a lifetime of noteworthy shipbuilding.

Oswald's widow continued to live at Blackheath until her death in 1930, when her body was interred beside his in the family vault/grave in the Old Cemetery at Southampton.

The substantial memorial which now carries the names of T R Oswald, his wives and seven of their children occupies a railed-off plot about 100 yards on the left of the path running south from the Hill Lane entrance. Fronting the path is a long inscription 'in Proud and Loving Memory of Lt Colonel William Digby Oswald DSO ... mortally wounded in France in July 1916', detailing the highlights of his army service in South Africa and France.

On the opposite face of the memorial, unseen at the back, the inscription for his father records only dates of birth and death – no mention of his distinctive contribution to the development of Southampton, as the pioneer of large-scale iron shipbuilding.

#### Postscript

The shipyard Oswald established at Woolston was reopened early in 1890 by a company called the Southampton Naval Ironworks Ltd. Its venture closed in 1893. The yard was taken in 1897 by J G Fay & Co, then from 1900 by Mordey, Carney & Co, before being acquired in 1904 by J I Thornycroft & Co.

Shipbuilding at Woolston is now all past history ... to which T R Oswald and his locally-named ships merit this footnote.