

## Wright, Sam (2024) The Hull Dock Company and the port of Hull, 1830-1860

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## The Hull Dock Company and the port of Hull, 1830-1860

For over 100 years, the Hull Dock Company stood as sole port authority in Hull, in charge of the upkeep and growth of its vital port infrastructure. However, the relationship between the port and the Dock Company was not as harmonious as one might imagine. In fact, the 'conflict between the mercantile classes of Hull and the Dock Company [...] was a recurring theme in the history of the town in the nineteenth century'.<sup>1</sup> From the various disputes that emerged, to the quality and quantity of port infrastructural developments, the Hull Dock Company [hereafter HDC] often caused more problems than it solved for the port of Hull, and the period 1830 to 1860 clearly demonstrates this.

The HDC was born in a cloud of desperation, in many ways foreshadowing the future of the port under its control. As early as 1756, the merchants and townspeople of Hull were well aware of the fact that volume of trade frequenting the port was increasing, and that the available infrastructure, then solely concentrated on an area of the River Hull known as the Old Harbour, was simply not large enough to cope with the increasing demands.<sup>2</sup> In the early 1770s, the town's conscious effort to avoid paying for a new dock itself, coupled with the Corporation of Hull also declaring themselves unable to finance it, led to a quick and 'last minute' decision to hand over the Crown land and construction rights to a 'hastily formed' private company which, in return for the right to demand dock dues from every vessel that entered the port, offered to construct the new dock.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the Hull Dock Company was born and welcomed as the 'saviour of the port', but that impression that would not last for very long.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout its reign, the workings of the HDC had serious repercussions for Hull. Perhaps the clearest indication of this is the physical development of port infrastructure at Hull during the case study period. Put simply, the HDC only built when it deemed it to be financially viable and crucially not when the port needed it, a sound strategy for a private company, but a problematic one for a port authority. Following the completion of Junction Dock, later Princes Dock, in 1829, the period 1830 to 1860 saw the construction of only two further docks. Railway Dock of '2 ¾ acres' opened in 1846, and Victoria Dock, accounting for 12.5 acres of water space opened in 1850 and was

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<sup>1</sup> J. M. Bellamy, *Some aspects of the economy of Hull in the nineteenth century with special reference to business history*. PhD thesis (The University of Hull. December 1965) 46

<sup>2</sup> G. Jackson, *The trade and shipping of eighteenth-century Hull* (East Yorkshire Local History Society, 1975) 51

<sup>3</sup> G. Jackson, 'Shipowners and private dock companies: the case of Hull, 1770-1970'. In L. M. Akveld & J. R. Bruijn, *Shipping companies and authorities in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: their common interest in the development of port facilities* (Den Haag, 1989) 47

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

comfortably the largest dock in Hull at the time.<sup>5</sup> This was obviously an improvement for the situation at Hull, whose water space had previously totalled around 23 acres, but in comparison to the development of Hull's Mersey rival, Liverpool, it was minuscule. In comparison to the two docks opened by the HDC between 1830 and 1860, the public authorities in Liverpool, through either building or purchasing, opened a total of 22 docks, including five in 1848 alone. (See table 1) As stated by Milne, Liverpool 'opened about 44 acres of dock space in the 1830s, 50 acres in the 1840s, and 72 acres in the 1850s', dramatically dwarfing the development that occurred at Hull during the same period.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 1: Dock openings in the ports of Hull and Liverpool in the period 1830-1860**

Year	Hull	Liverpool
1830		Clarence
1832		Brunswick
1834		Waterloo
1836		Victoria Trafalgar
1840		Coburg
1842		Toxteth
1844		Canning Half-tide Harrington (Bought)
1845		Albert
1846	Railway Dock	
1848		Salisbury Collingwood Stanley Nelson Bramley-Moore
1850	Victoria Dock	Wellington Wellington Half-tide
1851		Sandon Manchester (Bought)
1852		Huskisson
1855		Wapping
1859		Canada

Sources: J. M. Bellamy, *Some aspects of the economy of Hull in the nineteenth century with special reference to business history*. PhD thesis (The University of Hull. December 1965) 156

'Liverpool: the docks', in W. Farrer & J. Brownbill, *A history of the county of Lancaster*, Vol. 4 (London, 1911) pp. 41-43.  
*British History Online*: Available Online: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/lancs/vol4/pp41-43> [Accessed 29/10/2019]

Also, the HDC's cautious approach to expenditure meant that it had a damaging tendency to concentrate on the present moment rather than attempting any degree of foresight in building for

<sup>5</sup> Bellamy, *Some aspects of the economy of Hull*, 156

<sup>6</sup> G. J. Milne, *Trade and traders in mid-Victorian Liverpool: Mercantile business and the making of a world port* (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2000) 67

the future. Adrian Jarvis suggests that, because of issues such as changes to the size or proportions of ships, those tasked with developing dock facilities during this period needed to be able to plan 'an absolute minimum of five years ahead' in order to keep up with the changing demands placed on port facilities.<sup>7</sup> For the proactive authorities in Liverpool, this was not too much of an issue, but in Hull, the HDC's reactive tendencies meant that the docks were often outdated verging on obsolete before they even opened. For example, Albert Dock, which was opened in 1869 and was designed for a 'long and narrow waterfront site', proved to be so inadequate that, when it was busy, it could take up to a whole day for vessels to pass along it.<sup>8</sup> This lack of foresight can also be seen in the location and size of Hull's docks. The fact that the HDC built Victoria Dock on an inland site connected to the extremely congested Old Harbour demonstrates its lack of understanding of the present and future requirements of the port. Furthermore, up to 1860, the only dock in Hull to exceed ten acres in size was Victoria and by 1860, the total water acreage of the dock facilities in Hull was only around 39 acres, whereas, even by 1852 and the opening of Huskisson Dock, the total area of the dock facilities in Liverpool was 'over 150 acres'.<sup>9</sup> The size of Victoria Dock also demonstrates another problem, the fact that HDC was often more concerned with saving money than providing the best facilities for Hull. William Cubitt, an eminent civil engineer, stated that he had been asked by the HDC to advise it on the construction of a new dock in the late 1830s, and that he had given a proposal for a dock to be built on the site of Victoria Dock to the HDC before it had produced its own plan.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, he states that his proposal, whilst located in the exact same place as the subsequent HDC plan, was actually 'rather larger' by 'some five or six acres' and totalled around '20 acres', not the 12.5 built by the HDC.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to its lack of foresight, the HDC appears to have been quite difficult to work with. For example, the lack of the railway connections to Hull was a debate that featured prominently throughout the nineteenth century and was one in which the HDC was heavily involved; the chairman of the HDC during the case study period, J. C. Parker, was also the deputy chairman of the Railroad Company for example.<sup>12</sup> Debates, if one can even call them that, involving the HDC demonstrate quite clearly how uncooperative it could be. In late 1846, the Town Council and the

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<sup>7</sup> A. Jarvis, *Liverpool: a history of "The Great Port"* (Liverpool: Liverpool History Press, 2014) 103

<sup>8</sup> G. Jackson, *The history and archaeology of ports* (Kingswood, Tadworth, Surrey: World's Work Limited, 1983) 126

<sup>9</sup> D. J. Owen, *The origin and development of the ports of the United Kingdom* (London: Allman & Son Publishers Ltd. 1948) 69

<sup>10</sup> House of Commons, Minutes of evidence taken before the committee on the Kingston-Upon-Hull Docks bill (1840) In *Reports of the Committees: Six Volumes*, Vol. 6. Session 26 January – 22 June 1841. Vol. 9 [EBOOK] Available Online: [https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=jl0SAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=jl0SAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false) [Accessed 01/11/2019] pg. 50 (ccxcvi/40) q.1016-1021

<sup>11</sup> Minutes of evidence taken before the committee on the Kingston-Upon-Hull Docks bill, pg. 50 (ccxcvi/40) q.1024-1025

<sup>12</sup> Minutes of evidence taken before the committee on the Kingston-Upon-Hull Docks bill, pg. 187 (cdxxxiii/40) q. 4124-4125

Guardian Society wrote to the HDC on the subject of an application 'to establish a Railway Communication' between Hull, Lancashire and Barnsley.<sup>13</sup> Rather than engage in a conversation, the HDC directors simply informed the Council and Guardian Society that it did 'not deem it to be consistent with their duty to co-operate' with them 'in the contemplated application'.<sup>14</sup> Not only does this demonstrate the HDC's idea that it was not responsible for everything, it also provides a clear example of a rather blunt response that one could expect to receive from the Company. This can be further observed through the almost comical exchange between the HDC and local steamship companies reported in the *Hull Advertiser* [hereafter HA] on 28 April 1837. The HDC was damagingly sceptical with regards to new steamships, with the consulting engineer to the HDC, James Walker, stating in 1840 that he doubted the fact that steamships of the future would increase in width.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, dock developments during the case study period made little attempt to provide increased accommodation nor improved access for the largest steamships of the period. When a deputation from the Humber Union and St. George Steam-Packet companies wrote to the HDC to request better accommodation for their larger vessels currently under construction, which would not be able to enter the current docks, they were told by the Company to 'build their vessels to suit the capacity of the docks, instead of soliciting further dock-room'.<sup>16</sup> This extraordinary response demonstrates just how difficult the HDC could be to work with and, ultimately, it was exchanges such as this, coupled with the improved facilities available at Goole, which drove the largest steamships away from Hull.

The 'inflexible resolve' of the HDC can also be seen in the withdrawal of parliamentary bills.<sup>17</sup> As early as the late 1810s, the difficulties of working with the HDC were already directly hindering development. Despite initially agreeing to provide half the money for the construction of Junction Dock, the HDC would not accept the proposals offered in 1818 and instead 'proposed such unreasonable conditions', including the demand for the proposed increased duty charges on river vessels to be paid to the HDC 'permanently', that 'no agreement could possibly have been reached' and the bill was dropped.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, after the Committee investigating the Dock Bill of 1840 'made certain amendments in some of the clauses', the HDC 'would not accept the conditions imposed' by the Committee, and this unwillingness to compromise delayed the passing of the next

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<sup>13</sup> W. H. Huffam, *From W. H. Huffam, Secretary to the Hull Dock Company to Thomas Thompson* (3 October 1846) [Letter] Records of the full Hull Town (later City) Council. C TCC/1/603. Hull City Archives. Hull History Centre

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>15</sup> Minutes of evidence taken before the committee on the Kingston-Upon-Hull Docks bill, pg. 31 (cclxxvii/40) q. 639

<sup>16</sup> Hull Advertiser, 'The Dock Company and the Steam-vessel Proprietors', *Hull Advertiser* (Hull) 28 April 1837. Hull History Centre. pg. 3, 1<sup>st</sup> Column

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>18</sup> Bellamy, *Some aspects of the economy of Hull*, 133

Hull Dock Act and subsequent dock development for another four years.<sup>19</sup> This, in combination with the blunt responses to requests, provides a body of evidence that demonstrates that, when it came to the discussions of port development, the HDC often rejected requests instead of discussing the concerns of Hull and working to achieve a solution that suited all parties. This is especially significant considering the fact that the HDC had a virtually unchallenged monopoly over the port until the 1880s, owning, with a few exceptions, practically every piece of land that could be used for docks, a monopoly it fiercely protected.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, the HDC caused a range of difficulties for the port of Hull. Its approach to port infrastructural developments, and troubled relations with the people and business in Hull, meant that its initial popularity and image as the port's saviour quickly gave way to resentment. Many of its actions were predictable coming from a cash-strapped private company, but from a port authority, they were notably damaging, and it is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the leading bodies in Hull from the 1860s onwards were motivated by their desire 'to destroy the Dock Co'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Minutes of evidence taken before the committee on the Kingston-Upon-Hull Docks bill, pg.278 (dxxiv/40); Bellamy, *Some aspects of the economy of Hull*, 46

<sup>20</sup> Minutes of evidence taken before the committee on the Kingston-Upon-Hull Docks bill, pg. 185 (cdxxxi/40) Q. 4069-71

<sup>21</sup> Jackson, 'Shipowners and private dock companies: the case of Hull, 1770-1970', 53

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