

IMAGES OF A PORT

Life and times on
Preston Dock



Preston Dock Community History Group

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IMAGES OF A PORT:
 Life and Times on Preston Dock
 by
 The Preston Dock Community History Group

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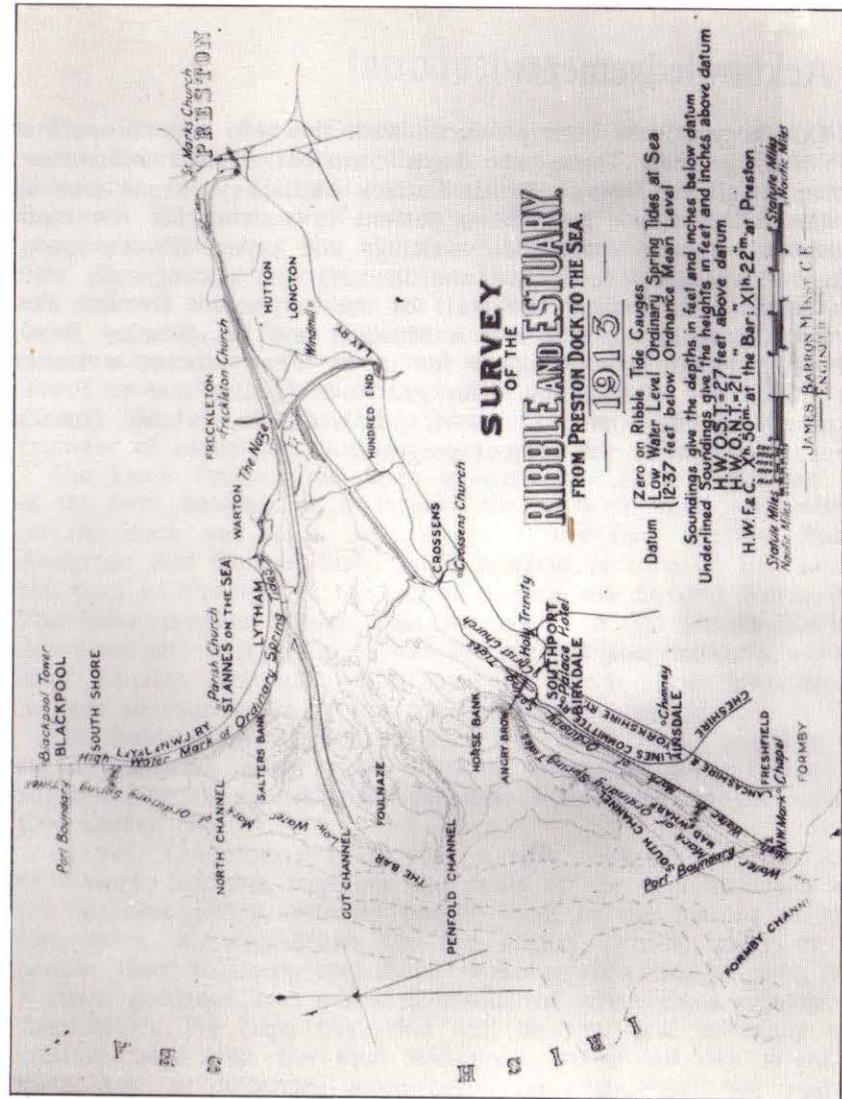
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Introduction

The Preston Dock Community History Group is part of a wider Community History Project organised by the School of Historical and Critical Studies at Lancashire Polytechnic, Preston. The aim of Community History is to involve local people in recovering the history of their area and their community. It is people's history rather than the history of great men and women that so many are familiar with from their school-days. As such, it is a supplement to existing histories, providing information about the lives and experiences of ordinary people. The Community History Project provides support and advice for groups like the Dock Group and acts only to facilitate the transfer of ideas into reality.

The Dock Project has been in existence since 1985 and this is its first booklet. It is largely the work of men who worked on the dock and it is their story. In the first section, Robert Anderton and George Steel paint a vivid picture of life around the port of Preston in the period before the Second World War. The next section, which has been written by Joseph Kellett, describes the call stand, a crucial part of the docker's working day. Finally, Patrick Mullarkey and Frank Lee join Joseph Kellett to recreate a typical working day at the dock.

The publication of this booklet has been made possible due to a generous grant from Preston Borough Council and the support which Lancashire Polytechnic have given to the idea of Community History.

As yet, Community History is a new departure in the study of history, bringing together the skills of the oral historian with the interest which ordinary people have in the history of their own area. It also draws on the ability, which many of the people that we have met have demonstrated, to be able, with a little guidance and encouragement, to write their experiences themselves. We hope that this will be the first of many such ventures and that the idea will grow. After all, we might all have had a different perspective on history if we had an account of the battle of Agincourt from the archers' point of view.

Dr. Carol L. Jones,
Mrs. Lesley Farrell,
Community History Officers,
Lancashire Polytechnic, Preston.

Through the eyes of a child

For many people childhood memories remain particularly vivid. This is certainly the case for Robert Anderton, whose family moved to Clyde Street, opposite the dock gates, in 1912 when he was three years old. In the early years of the century the river still had a country feel to it, with leafy lanes and woodland stretching from Powis Road to Rivers Way and with vast expanses of sand churned up by the dredgers which were used to keep the river deep enough for ships to pass along.

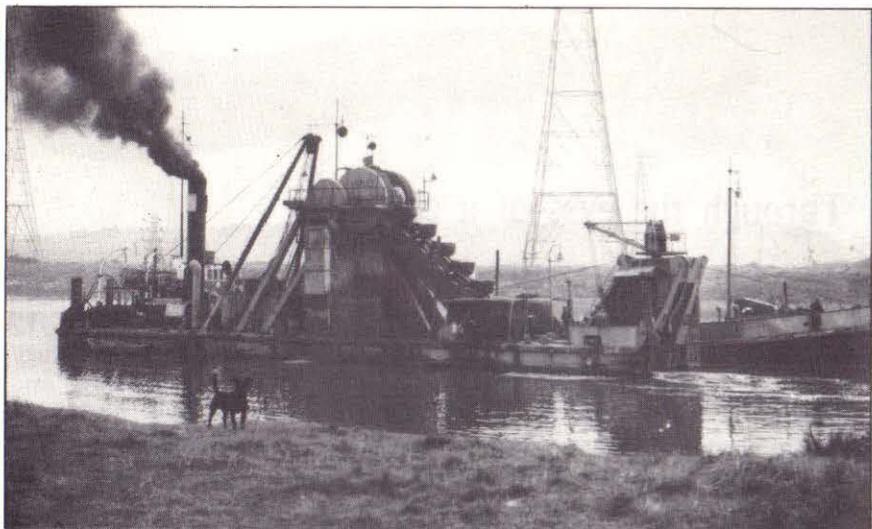
The sandy areas were very popular with local people and so reminiscent of the seaside were they that they were known as Little Blackpool. Robert Anderton recalls that he and his friends spent much of their spare time there.

We used to go down and do a lot of walking together and camping out. When we had our holidays we used to go down onto Little Blackpool with a tent and take a loaf and something to eat - a bit of bacon or something like that. We used to fry up; we had billy-cans with tea in. We used to have a week's holiday there in a tent. It was all marsh, you see. It was like a riverside beyond the docks. We used to collect eggs - duck eggs and all that sort of thing.

The pools left by the dredgers provided opportunities to 'tread for flat fish', which the boys took home to eat.

The mud dredged up by the vessels spread itself along the banks and on hot summer days the surface dried out into a myriad of tiny cracks. Shimmering in the sunshine it gave the impression of being solid and safe; in reality the surface was thin and the sands were treacherous and dangerous place for those who ventured out too far - as the young Robert found to his cost one never-to-be-forgotten summer's day during a game of football. As the ball flew over the boys' heads it rolled onto the sands and somebody had to go and retrieve it.

I was the nearest and they said "Go on, Andy. Get it."
So I went and got the ball but as I bent down to pick



The dredger Arpley at work on the river in 1959. The smoke from these vessels was the subject of local controversy at this time.
(L.E.P.)



Soft mud at Lytham dock brook, similar to that into which Mr. Anderton sank.
(Harris Museum)

it up I put my weight on one side. You see it was only a thin crust on top . . . I sunk right up to here. And I was shouting and bawling for my grandma and everybody.

Luckily, a man working nearby with a team of horses heard Robert's cries and came to the rescue.

There was a firm called Chris Miller's and they used to cart stuff for the concrete works, gravel. They had big horses and carts. And I remember this man - I used to know him, he had red hair and they called him 'Blood Nut' - and what he did, he took the lead horse off and they had long reins, and he threw the reins to me like and he said "Put that under your arms and grab the other end and put both ends together and then ride." So I did. I held it and then off the horses went and they dragged me face down across the mud. I lost my shoes. I daren't go home. I had no shoes!

Playing around the river could clearly be perilous, and both the dock police and the dock workers were always on the look-out for children who had sneaked onto the dock, heedless of the danger but drawn by the opportunities for adventure presented by the water and the sands. The young Robert was perhaps more wary of the police than most because one of the dock policemen, Dick Lee, lived in his street.

A respondent whose father was a warehouse foreman on the dock at this time, recalls accompanying him there on Sundays for trips in a boat, which she sometimes had to share with some unsavoury cargoes of bones and cattle skins! She also was watchful of the dock police on occasions.

When we were on holiday from school, my mother used to say "Take your dad his dinner on the dock". And I used to take the two younger ones in a pram. The dock gates weren't where they are now. They were right up at the corner of Strand Road, where the Siemen's lamp-works used to be. There used to be dock policemen to make sure no pinching went on and they had a cabin there. The pram was one of those banana-shaped ones, with one youngster at one end and one at the other and a well where they could put their feet. My dad used to say "Here, there's some potatoes". They'd broken a sack. But when I was coming out past the policemen I used to hold the pram up so he wouldn't know. And he used to say "It's alright, Mary, I know tha's some potatoes in thee pram, but go on."



Aerial view of the dock in 1921, before the grain silo was built. Note how it was surrounded by countryside. A trade depression at this time accounts for the large number of ships tied up. (Harris Museum)

However, as Mr. Anderton reveals, some of the boys' other activities were regarded less favourably by the dock police. Every three months a boat called the *Timbo* arrived in Preston from the West Indies carrying a cargo of coconuts and monkey nuts. This ship was a particular favourite with the local children because the sailors would throw coconuts over the side and into the river for them to retrieve.

We all knew in Little Wigan when the *Timbo* came in. "*Timbo's* due next week". "Right". And we were there when she came in. We would be down at Little Blackpool waiting and watching for it to come up and then, "Right, here we go" . . . And you could go there with a sack and they would fill a sack with coconuts and throw them over the side and we used to swim for them. There are steps on the dock where the divers go down . . . But obviously we couldn't go to the side of the ship where the gangway was because the dock police would have been there. As soon as the policemen had gone we were across like rabbits . . . down the steps and we used to swim and get these coconuts and up and away.

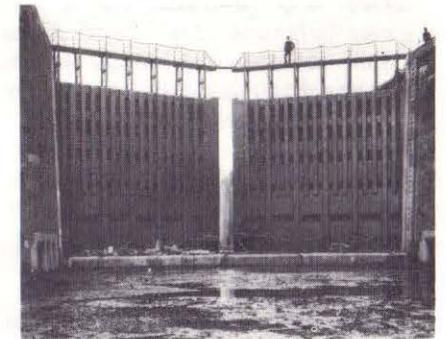
There were also times, Mr. Anderton continues, when the boys would go swimming at night. Once again trophies were obtained!

At night we used to go to the coal wharf which was

next door, practically opposite. And we used to dive in there because between where the ship used to dock and the dockside when they emptied the waggons a lot used to drop into the dock. And over the years it built up like a kind of little hill. Sometimes the divers used to have to go down and move it with a grab. But we used to dive down and get cobs of coal and bring them up. Do about three dives and come back and put them on the steps. And somebody else would carry them. We had an orange box for a truck, with pram wheels on. We could get coal like that.

It was not, however, merely the sight of young boys diving into the water to gather coals and coconuts that attracted the attention of the police.

We'd swim around because we hadn't swimming costumes in them days. We weren't very modest! Just go down the divers' steps and dive in and grab a couple of coconuts and dog-leg it back to the steps. And other lads would be there, some at the top watching for Dick Lee, the dock policeman. And get about a dozen coconuts, get your clothes on in the timber and away.

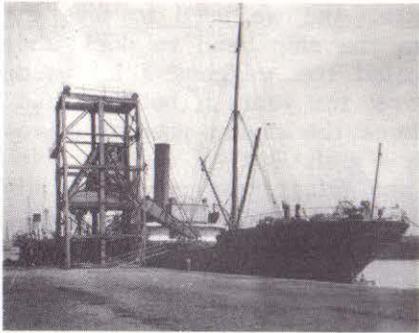


The dock workers were employed on a casual basis at this time and free potatoes, fish, eggs, coconuts and coal were clearly important subsidies to the family income.

The dock gates in the 1890s, before the dock was filled with water. (L.E.P.)

George Steel, whose family were stevedores on the dock, went to live with his grandfather, Jonathan Steel, in 1931. After his grandfather died, Mr. Steel was brought up by his uncle, who was also involved in the family business. Consequently, the young George was often in and around the docks area and as a result he has a distinct impression of the houses in which many of the dock workers lived at that time.

In town they were all gas lights and in these little two-up and two-down houses where most of the dockers lived there were little gas mantles. Real dim lit lights. And they had no hot running water. So when they came home



A French boat, the Ville de Berne from Dieppe, discharging coal.

from work it was an enamel or zinc bath. And there would be an open fire with a water heater beside it, like a boiler and they ladled the hot water out of it into the bath. And all the women of the house would go out while the boss got a bath!

Mr. Steel also has a vivid recollection of what it meant to have an occupation that was based on casual labour.

In those days it was temporary labour. They started a person when a ship came in and when the work was finished that was it. There was no regular wage. If there was only one day's work, you only got one day's pay. But some of the old ships, it would take maybe three or four weeks to unload it. So the men used to go and have subs during the week. Well, their weekly wage was only thirty shillings and they would go and get a five shilling sub. They used to get three or four pints for a bob [one shilling or 5p].

Not surprisingly, the men's wives often objected to this practice.

There would be trouble if their wives came down. "Why have you given my husband a sub? We've no money left." So they would have to work out which men were bad for taking too much money and not taking money home.



The Malmen unloading timber pit props in 1935.

Mr. Steel's grandfather who, as a stevedore, employed dockers, would often give the women the money that their husbands had spent on drink, but he made sure the men worked it off later. A more serious problem for the men was illness. The work

was physically demanding and conditions on the dock, with the dust from grain, china clay and coal blowing about, the damp atmosphere and having to work outside in all weathers, were not conducive to good health. As Mr. Steel relates, however, the dock communities had their own system for coping with this.

They daren't go to a doctor because how were they going to pay for that doctor? They would go to somebody in the street who they knew had a family with a history of illness and say "Oh, what do you do for this, what do you do for that?", and treat one another rather than go to the doctor. And if they had to go to hospital, well some of the firms used to run an insurance policy so that if anybody was hurt they could get a recommend (that was like an insurance form) to go to the hospital for treatment, and they used to pay through the firm.

Doctors sent ladies round to the dock to ask the employers to help to pay off outstanding debts accumulated by the dockers. Mr. Steel concludes, "It's no wonder they died young years ago because they were scared to go to a doctor".

The dock labour force was exclusively male but a few women were employed at the port in offices or, as in the case of Mr. Anderton's mother, as catering staff. Mr. Anderton's mother had been widowed during the First World War. Prior to her marriage she had been a teacher but women were not allowed to remain as teachers once they married and so she had had to give up her career. When her husband died it is not difficult to imagine how hard it must have been for her to manage. But manage she did, taking a job in the Seamen's Mission on the dock. This gave Robert a legitimate excuse to be on the dock, helping his mother at her work. He remembers,

I used to go in the Mission and you would meet some of the sailors and they would take you along to their ship and I used to go on the bridge and act to be steering it and all that sort of thing. And some were sailing ships, you know, from Sweden and Denmark in those days . . . I used to meet all these Norwegians and Swedes and all the nationalities, even from being very small.

Mr. Anderton remembers the Mission building very clearly.

It was a wooden, single-storey building. They had a community room, where they played cards and all that sort of thing. Then there was a tea bar, which my mum

managed. She used to serve them with the tea and of course I used to have to go and help scrub the floors and the tables. There was nothing alcoholic. There was just tea and biscuits, tea and sandwiches. It was a very economical charge. I don't know whether they paid or not really. I don't think they did. I think it was supplied by the Seamen's Mission.

Many different cargoes came into Preston, but amongst the most important were timber and wood products.

They used to bring wood pulp deck-cargoes across the North Sea . . . pulp and timber. Preston dock, right from the pump house at the bottom by the Ship Inn on Riversway, right up as far as Little Blackpool, there was nothing but timber. Thousands and thousands of tons of timber, big stacks.

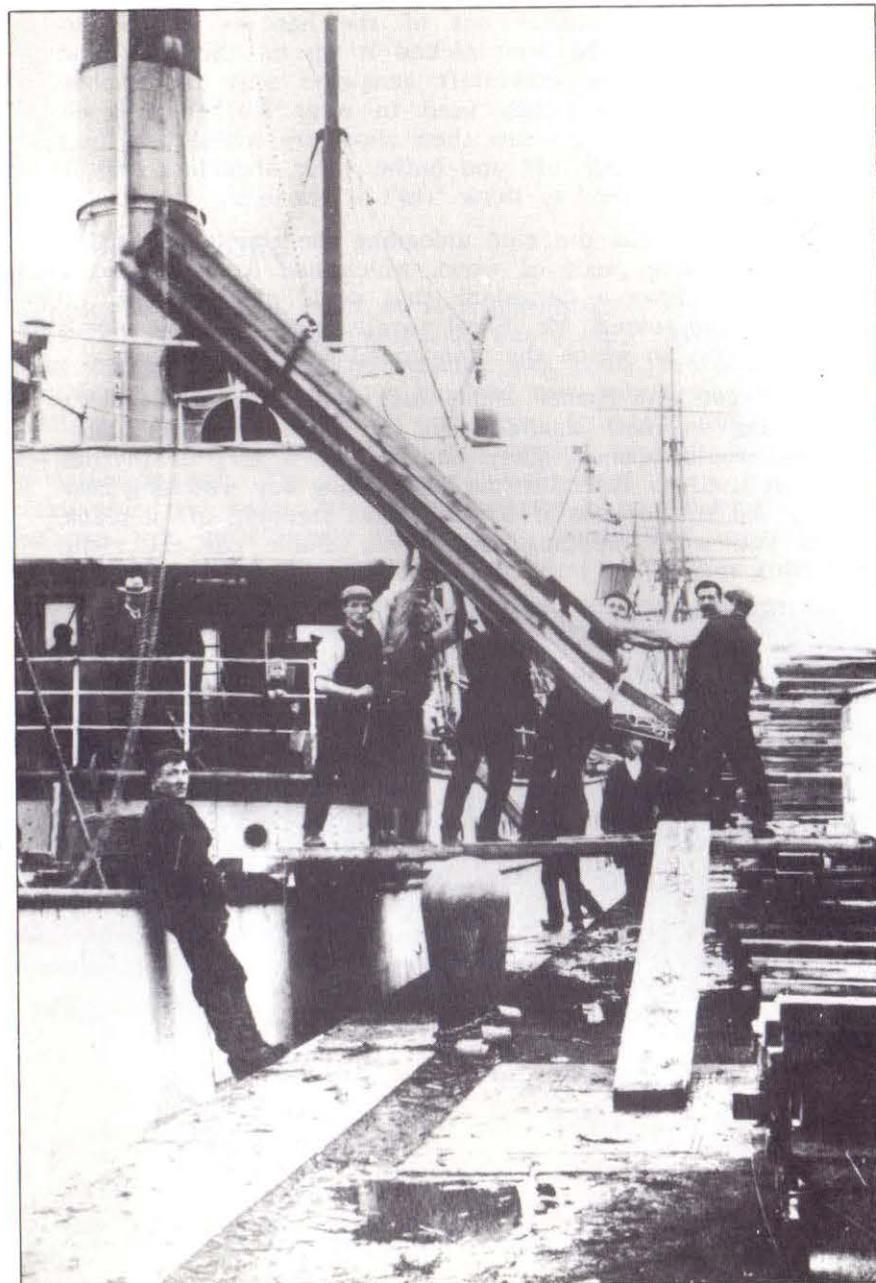
Both Mr. Anderton and Mr. Steel remember the men who unloaded the timber ships. Mr. Anderton recalls,

the dockers used to wear leather pads on their shoulders carrying the timber. Big lumps of timber. They were strong men. They were a great race, the dockers, they were great fellows.

Mr. Steel was often down on the dock with his grandfather and so had the opportunity to observe the work at first hand.



The dock side lined with stacks of timber in the 1930s.



Unloading timber from a ship using a sling.

(Harris Museum)

They lifted the timber out of the hatches on to the decks and then the men picked it up on the deck and walked down these makeshift gangways with the timber on their shoulders. They used to wear leather pads on their shoulders . . . I saw their shoulders when they used to take their pads off and bathe their shoulders and it affected me. I used to think "isn't it terrible".

Another problem for the men unloading the timber was the feat of getting a long piece of wood, which had to be balanced on the shoulder, down a gangplank that could often appear to be demonically possessed! Mr. Steel recalls spending hours admiring the skilled way in which the men coped with this difficulty.

They'd get this timber and a long plank that would start bouncing on their shoulder. At the same time the gangplank would bounce. They had to get a sort of rhythm and it used to fascinate me as a young boy watching how they did it. Because if someone was stepping off a plank and you were stepping on, if you didn't get the right rhythm it would try to throw you.

The experiences which Mr. Anderton and Mr. Steel had on the docks must have influenced them considerably because eventually both went to sea. Mr. Anderton sailed from New York and Boston with the White Star fleet. Mr. Steel sailed from Preston on a tanker, the *Empire Burn*. During the war the ship was commandeered by the Navy and sent to France to take part in the D-Day landings. It was then that the Navy discovered that George Steel was too young for active service, having signed up to go to sea at the tender age of eighteen, three years before he was legally old enough to do so! He was transferred to the *Queen Mary* as a junior engineer. When he finally gave up the sailor's life, Mr. Steel returned to Preston where he spent the next thirty years working for Balmers ship repairers on Preston dock.

The call stand

The call stand, or 'stud' as it was commonly known, was situated near the main dock gates. It was a very harrowing experience for a newcomer. The building was badly ventilated and in its heyday as many as four hundred men could be crowded in waiting for work. The stench and smoke from the cigarettes and pipes was overwhelming. You can imagine what it was like on a winter's day! The newcomer would feel very lonely and vulnerable and when the labour foreman began picking out and he was left until nearly the end, he would feel very isolated indeed. As a rule, out of a batch of thirty or so men that were



Aerial view of the dock showing the grain silo.

(Airviews (M/cr) Ltd.)

started only three or four would stick it out and make a permanent job out of it.

Dock work tended to appeal to ex-seamen who wanted to settle down ashore. If a man was selected for engagement as a dock worker he was issued with a red book, as a probationary docker, and he would keep this book, either until he was accepted as a permanent docker or until he resigned or was sacked. After he had been accepted he received a black book and he became a Registered Dock Worker (RDW) and was given a number, which he kept all the time he worked on the dock.

There was an office at the front of the one-storey brick building and to the rear there was the call stand: a large, high-domed room with tiled floors - a very cold, bare place with windows on each side for ventilation and light. There was a double door at each end of the front of the call stand and men would enter through the bottom door. The door at the top was usually locked at this stage.

Although they did not officially start work until 8 a.m. on the morning shift and 1 p.m. in the afternoon, the dockers had to be at the call stand by 7.45 a.m. and 12.45 p.m.. At exactly these times the manager locked the bottom door of the call stand and opened the top door as work was allocated. The extra fifteen minutes, for which the men were not paid, meant that they could be given jobs and arrive at the place at which they were to work for the day promptly on the hour. Anyone arriving after those times risked losing his wages.

After nationalisation in 1947, dockers had to present themselves at the call stand to get their books stamped A.P. (Appearance or Attendance Proved) in order to qualify for the flat-wage, which was paid whether they got work or not. This had replaced the old system whereby men were hired by the day and if not taken on received no money at all. The wall between the offices and the call stand had a row of shutters which could be raised to allow the dockers who were going home to present their books to be stamped. When a ship had finished loading or discharging its cargo the dockers would, as a rule, be told to report back to the call stand, either to be given another job or, if no work was available, to receive the A.P. stamp before returning to try again for work at the next shift. If anyone came to the call stand after the bottom doors were locked his book was taken off him and he was sent home and lost his A.P. money for that shift. He could also lose his A.P. stamps for the week if the managers thought he deserved it.

The manager in the 1940s and 1950s was a very hard man indeed. I remember arriving at the stand one morning and



Unloading alfalfa in the 1950s.

(*News Chronicle, Manchester*)

being on the last minute. I threw my bike against the wall and ran to the bottom door. Just as I turned the corner I saw the door beginning to close. I ran to the door and knocked to get the manager's attention. He looked through the little glass pane above the key hole and carried on locking the door. He then indicated that I should go to the top door and, feeling very pleased, thinking that he was going to let me enter, I ran to the far end of the building. He opened the door and taking my book out of my hand he informed me that I was late and would be able to pick up my book at lunch time. Not only did I lose my A.P. money for that morning, I also missed the 'tell-off' (being picked for work) for the banana boat that was in the dock. If you were lucky enough to get on that you were sure of getting a good week's wage. It was about the most costly ten seconds of my life!

In the port of Preston there were several employers: Preston Corporation, the Belfast Steam Packet Company, Pyke's Corn Millers, Kellett's Stevedoring Company. The biggest employer by far was Preston Corporation (the Port of Preston Authority:



Gravel and stone, possibly from Cornwall, being loaded onto lorries using cranes and grabs.

PPA). The employers had different roles within the port.

Firstly, there was the National Dock Labour Board, set up by the government in 1947 to provide permanent employment for the dockers. The NDLB were responsible for hiring labour, for issuing books to registered dockers and for the discipline and welfare of the men. The call stand was run by the NDLB manager and a clerk, and there was a welfare officer who also looked after Fleetwood dock workers. The NDLB also gave training in first aid and life-saving, and they introduced instructors to travel round the dock giving advice on all the machinery used to load and discharge cargoes, the cranes, bobcats, fork-lifts etc., and, with the advent of containerisation and roll-on, roll-off traffic, in the use of articulated tug-units and giant straddle carriers. They also organised weekend conferences to discuss the new developments at the port.

Welfare on the docks, as far as sporting activities were concerned, was excellent. For a small payment each week you

could enjoy activities such as fishing, bowls, football, rowing and swimming. Inter-port contests were held in various sports and every year and inter-port regatta was held on the Thames, with coxed fours, eights and sculling contests. The men taking part would be allowed paid leave, free travel by train to and from London and accommodation in a first class hotel.

The NDLB was financed by all the shipping companies and stevedoring companies who used the port, by a levy on cargoes discharged and loaded. Any employers wishing to hire men had to notify the NDLB of the number of men they required and these were allocated on a regular daily or weekly basis. The stevedores, who hired men from the NDLB, had no control over the dockers, to discipline or sack them and could only report them to the NDLB manager for punishment. He wielded quite a lot of power and indeed one or two tended to be a little dictatorial. The manager was responsible for disciplining men for offences such as habitual lateness, absenteeism and refusing to go to a job when selected. The docker would be summoned to appear before a disciplinary board consisting of equal numbers of ships' agents and union representatives. The chairman retained a casting vote in the event of a stalemate. The usual punishment was suspension from work but, if required, a man could be sacked. He could appeal against the sentence if he wished but, by and large, the punishment was accepted.

The other main employer was the Port of Preston Authority and they handled most of the ships that used the port. They were concerned with the storage and despatch of cargoes and with providing the foremen, supervisors, crane drivers and sometimes the checkers. They were also responsible for the dredging of the river and the docks and for the maintenance of the port and its equipment. All their staff, including the crane drivers, were employees of the PPA (the Corporation). They had a labour foreman and his assistant, the time keeper, who worked directly under the control of the chief inspector.

Every morning the chief inspector, the dock traffic manager and the labour foreman would meet to work out the labour requirements for that afternoon and the following day. Sometimes night gangs would be needed



The Admiral Nelson bringing the first consignment of pumice into Preston in 1965. (L.E.P.)

and these would be 'told off' at the 12.45 p.m. call stand. Men told off for nights would go home to rest for the afternoon prior to starting their shifts.

These shifts could be 6 p.m. to 2 a.m., 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. or 2 a.m. to 12 noon the following day. Usually it would only be for one night, but sometimes they lasted over two or three nights. The day after the night shift the men would rest and return to the call stand at 7.45 a.m. the following day. Then, once the management had worked out their needs, the labour foreman would again begin telling off his list for the 12.45 stand.

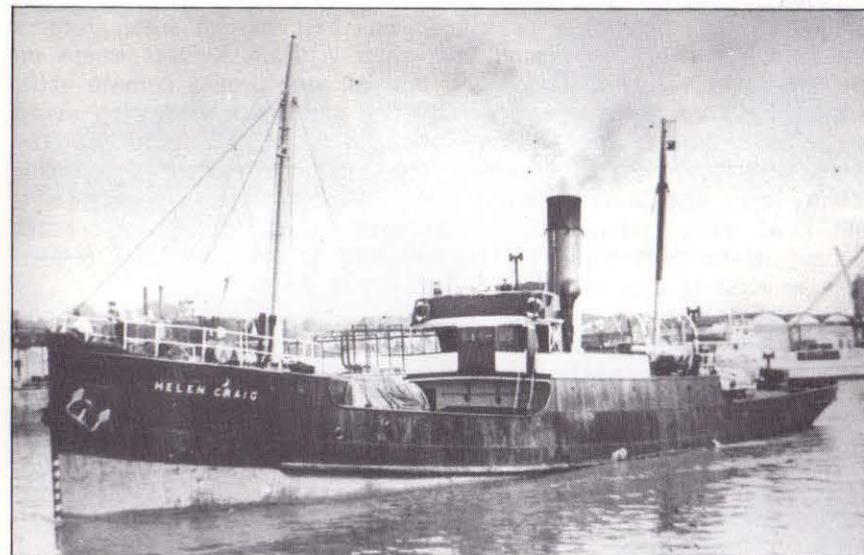
The dockers at Preston, like at any other port, were a fiercely independent lot and no respecters of authority. They did not believe in touching the forelock. Nevertheless, the labour foreman had a very important part to play as far as the dockers were concerned. If you ran foul of him he could punish you very severely and hit you where it hurt the most, in the wallet. When telling off he could punish you in two ways: firstly, by leaving you on the call stand and not giving you work at all; or, secondly, by giving you a dirty, low-paid job. I've seen men stand right at the front looking for work and the labour foreman has picked all round them so they would move back again into the main group. The same thing would happen again and again and eventually they would reach the wall. If there was spare labour that day they would be left without a job and only get an A.P. stamp. If they had to be picked for work they would get the dirtiest, lowest-paid job possible.

The labour foreman could also favour certain men by giving them well-paid jobs or if he knew that a ship was going to work overtime every night and weekend, he could put his favourites on these ships. These men were known as 'blue eyes'. Some labour foremen were very fair and tried to share the work out properly but the temptation to retaliate if someone had given them a load of cheek was always there.

Different types of cargo were more lucrative to the dockers than others and gangs of men specialised in unloading particular cargoes. For example, between the 1940s and 1960s the Belfast Shipping Company had a regular trade between Belfast and Preston and their ship the *Helen Craig* was famed for its consistency. It docked in Preston every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Two gangs were employed on her each time she docked with her general cargo and regular men were employed on a weekly basis.

The two gangs who worked the ship stood in a certain place on the call stand and their own foreman came on the call

stand to tell them off for work. Pyke Corn Millers, who owned a grain silo on the docks, employed their own men on the grain silo but if they had a grain ship in dock their foreman would come on the call stand for men. He was known as 'Johnny Ray' owing to the fact that he was deaf and wore a hearing aid. When Johnny Ray came on the call stand the men would try



The Helen Craig, a regular visitor to Preston between 1891 and 1959.
(L.E.P.)



The grain silo and number one shed.
(L.E.P.)

to hide behind each other to escape his notice because grain ships were dirty, low-paid jobs. He was not a popular man!

Timber was another unpopular cargo amongst the dockers. Kelletts, the stevedores, handled timber ships carrying mainly Russian timber which, before the advent of packaged timber, was stored loose in the holds and on the decks. These ships took as long as three to four weeks to discharge and the bonus payments were very low or nil. It was bad enough when Johnny Ray came on the call stand but when William Kellett came on pandemonium reigned. The front line of men would remain still, but behind them men would surge back and forth trying to avoid him. They didn't fancy being trapped in a badly-paid job for three or four weeks. However, the labour foreman would tell Johnny Ray and William Kellett to leave his regular pulp, ferry and coal gangs alone and these men would stand in certain places on the call stand or, better still, be sent to work before William Kellett commenced his tell off.

Five or six years before the dock closed the dockers' shop stewards insisted on a fairer system of job allocation and a card system was worked out between them and the management. Each docker's number was put on a card and if he was



The Bardic Ferry transported lorries laden with goods from Northern Ireland straight onto the road. (L.E.P.)



The container ship Hermia on her maiden voyage to Larne in 1974. (L.E.P.)

a tug-unit driver or a fork-lift driver a tag would be attached to the top of the card. When the labour foreman went to the call stand to tell off he would take the cards of all the available men. These had to be placed in order of finish from previous jobs; the first to finish at the front, the last job to finish at the back. The labour foreman would tell off the specialist men first (fork-lift, tug drivers etc.), and then other men. He would do this by going through the cards from front to back and shouting each man's number in turn. The men all knew when they had finished and woe betide the labour foreman if he got the cards stacked wrongly.

This system was very good for the men and it stopped any favouritism and ensured that the good jobs were fairly shared out. But, as far as the management was concerned, it was not as good as the old way. Any man who would work hard under the old system was favoured and the lazy workers only got a job after the good workers. Also, on the old system they had the regular gangs of workers on the pulp ships, the ferries and the coal ships. This suited the shipping companies because

they knew the type of men they were going to get. But under the new system everyone went to work in order, regardless of their ability. Pulp men went on ferries, ferry men went on pulp and so on. At first even the majority of dockers did not like it, but after a few months the men saw that the new system was much fairer and accepted it. Rotas were made out for shed work and any weekly jobs, and the men were sent to these jobs on Monday morning. Rotas were also used to ensure that all the men got an equal opportunity to do overtime.

There were also some improvements in methods of working on the docks and ironically one of these was introduced by William Kellett. In the early 1950s all the timber was landed from the ship in slings and onto little two-wheeled trucks. These were then pushed over very rough ground for long distances, well away from the quayside. The timber was then stacked in lanes ready for collection by motors at a later date. This was a slow, arduous method and William Kellett decided to try loading the slings of timber onto trailers and towing the trailer away from the ship to the area which had been allocated. There, a mobile crane would lift the slings off the trailers and the men would have a minimum amount of walking to do. This method also allowed him to use land that had been too far away from the ship by the old system. The PPA later used tractors and trailers for their ships. So, unpopular as he was when he came on the call stand, William Kellett had made life a little easier for the dockers.

JOSEPH KELLETT

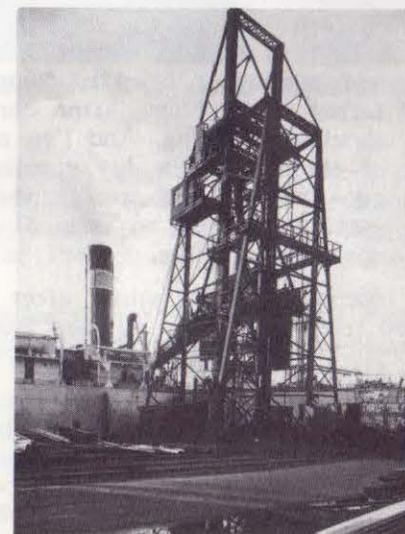
Working on the dock

As Mr. Anderton and Mr. Steel have remarked, life was often hard for dock workers and even after nationalisation had removed many of the worst aspects of casual employment, some dockers still did not approve of the idea of their own sons being employed at the port. This was so despite the fact that sons of dockers were often believed to get preferential treatment, getting a black book and becoming a Registered Dock Worker before those who had no previous connections with the dock. Two men who started work in the 1950s vividly remember their own fathers' reactions to the idea of them being on the dock under any circumstances. One, Frank Lee, recalls,

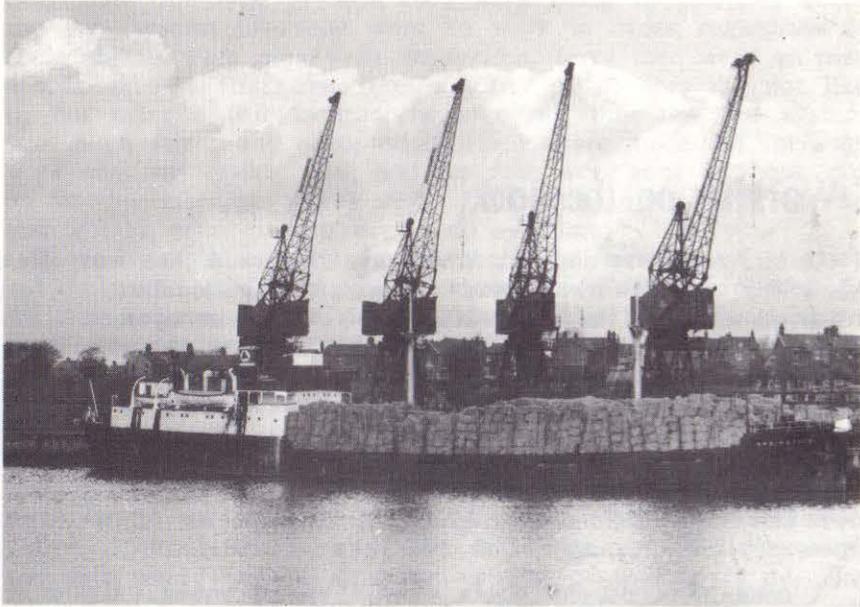
I once went on the docks when I was a young lad and my dad was on the docks then. I was still at school and he was carrying timber off a ship at that present time. He always called me 'lad', never Frank or son. I was the youngest. He said, "What are you doing on here?", because I only lived just outside the gates. "I've just come to have a look, dad". He said, "I catch you on here again, I'll leather you. Get off the docks and don't let me see you on here again."

Mr. Lee also remembers the physical effects of being a dock worker in the days before mechanical devices made life a little easier for the men.

In those days it was work,



Coal shipment and the coal hoist at the Albert Edward dock.



*The Springtide, loaded with esparto grass, which was used to make paper.
(News Chronicle, Manchester)*

and putting it blankly, damned hard work. I've seen my father come home after carrying timber all day and his shoulder bleeding. And I've also seen him come home two or three times a day absolutely wet through to the skin, get changed and straight back. And while he was away getting changed he was off pay. Eventually he died with double pneumonia.

Joseph Kellett's father, after forty years on the dock himself, also tried to prevent his son from joining the dock workforce.

He'd seen the hard side of the docks. It was very hard work. Before modernisation and containerisation it was all hand-haul. It was all heavy lifting. And there was quite a number of injuries and deaths on the docks in them days. They didn't place great store in looking after that side of the job . . . When I left school they put me in a trade - painting and decorating - but I didn't want to do it. I wanted to go into farming. He wouldn't let me go farming. He said I'd to have a trade. He didn't want me to finish up on the dock like he had.



*A crane driver's eye-view of the dock in 1952. Note the line of railway waggons leading up to the coal hoist.
(L.E.P.)*

Although Joseph Kellett eventually got his chance to work on a farm, he left there to work on the trawlers at Fleetwood. From there he went into the Navy and after returning to fishing he finally went onto the dock at Preston in 1954 and stayed for twenty-six years.

Until the card system of employment was introduced in 1968, dockers usually worked in gangs and were paid piece-rates. Therefore, in order to maximise the wages the members of a gang had to be hard-working, physically strong and reliable in order to get the chance to unload the more lucrative cargoes. Mr. Kellett explained that where you worked inside the ship's hold was also a crucial factor in determining how much the gang made in bonuses.

If there was two pulp boats in they put two pulp gangs on one boat in the main hatches and they put another two in another ship in the main hatches. And they'd make

up the other gangs off the call stand with whatever men were left on. You've got to realise that in the older type of ships (as the ships became more modern it didn't really matter), the store in number one hold and number four hold usually was pretty bad due to the fact that the bows dropped away pretty sharply. Or if it was down aft there was a tunnel where the ship's propeller would go through. The stern would cut away pretty sharp in number four, so that the stowage was very uneven and it made it very awkward for slinging etc.. Number two and number three were always the best holds. They were pretty smooth stowage and that was where the most weight was. Whatever ship you went on, whatever weight was in that hold, you knew before you started how much you were going to get out of that hold. You were paid piece-work. They'd say "One thousand ton, ten pounds". The quicker you got it out, the more money you made. You went away to another ship or went back to the call stand when you had finished.

The system led to favouritism and caused hardship as the dockers grew older and were no longer able to keep up with the pace of work demanded by the best gangs. As Mr. Kellett recalls, the pulp gangs were known as 'blue eyes'.

You had four regular pulp gangs and they were called 'blue eyes'. At one stage they got quite a bit of preferential treatment

because they worked regular gangs and they'd proved themselves on the docks . . . There was a lot of resentment against these blue eyes by people who came on the dock . . . especially with the younger ones, because obviously the younger ones are more fiery and have got more temper, a shorter fuse than older people.



Wood pulp from Scandinavia being loaded into lorries on the quayside in 1965.

As Mr. Kellett notes, however, the resentment had a more practical base than mere jealousy.

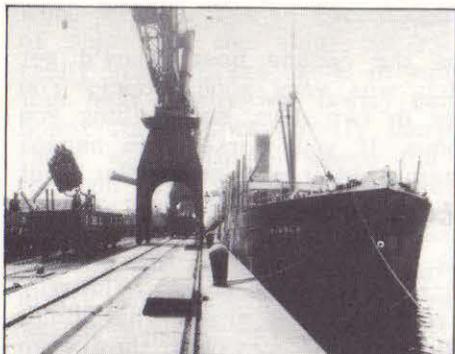
For instance, you'd go on the banana boat. They'd get all the bananas out, which was very good money. You could make a week's wage in two days, so anything you got after that was a bonus. If you worked the banana boat and worked in the main hold it was great. But what they used to do was to put the blues in if there was no pulp [boat] in, or even take them off a pulp ship and put them on the banana boat. They'd take all the bananas out, then they would send the blue eyes back to the pulp boat and send more men to clean after them. That didn't go down very well at all. But this was why they were called blue eyes, they got preferential treatment.

To belong to a pulp gang, however, a man had to have demonstrated that he could work hard and would not shirk. The blue eyes gave no quarter to the shifty or lazy.

If you didn't pull your weight in a pulp gang the gang boss would tell the labour foreman and the next time you went on the call stand they'd just leave you out. So all the men [in a gang] knew each other and worked together for a good number of years most of them. Some of them worked down there for twenty-odd years as teams.

Each gang had eleven members, six men working below and five on the deck, one of whom was the capstan man. If the pulp being unloaded from a ship was being transported by rail it was the capstan man's responsibility to ensure not only that the railway waggons were clean (the snow-white pulp could not be contaminated by the residue of the waggon's last cargo), but also that the waggons were positioned correctly, and that as one waggon was loaded another was pulled in to replace it. If the pulp was being transported by lorry the capstan man similarly had to ensure that they too were in place as the men unloaded the cargo. Four gangs worked a ship at a time, making forty-four men plus several sheeters. The capstan men all worked together and Patrick Mullarkey, who was himself a capstan man, describes the responsibilities which went with the work he did.

In some ports it was classed as a specialised job and I think at Preston it was more specialised than ever because you were the leading figure in a way. When the gang used to start at eight o'clock in the morning I used



The Spidola discharging pit props into railway waggons. (Harris)

to have to have everything ready for them well before eight so they could be away to a flying start. But I used to get compensated for that 'cos I used to get home for my dinner at half-past eleven. I used to have to have the stall laid out and there was a sort of agreement with the gang really . . . "Well, alright, you can go. You start

early, you finish early." That was a good arrangement. But as regards safety there was a lot of onus on the capstan man because I'll say one thing, all the years I worked on capstan I could have killed somebody every day.

Mr. Kellett also has vivid recollections of the work patterns on the dock.

There would be six men in the hold slinging, there would be four loaders in a gang. The loaders loaded the railway waggons and the motors. And there would be a capstan man to pull the railway waggons into berth under the crane. If you went to the quay you had two men with you, sheeters. And they used to sheet the railway waggons and cover them with heavy tarpaulins in them days. It was a thankless, dirty job and least paid. So they didn't stay with a regular gang. They just picked two men off the call stand. Many a time they'd be 'pinkies', temporary dockers that were on probation or they may be students. They were called pinkies because when you went on the dock and they were selecting men to be employed by the port they were interviewed by this panel and if you were selected you were told to report to the call stand. You'd go there and they'd give you a red book and you were a temporary or probationary docker.

Within the gang system some gangs were believed to have been better than others. According to Mr. Kellett one of the

best gangs he can remember was called Shannon's gang.

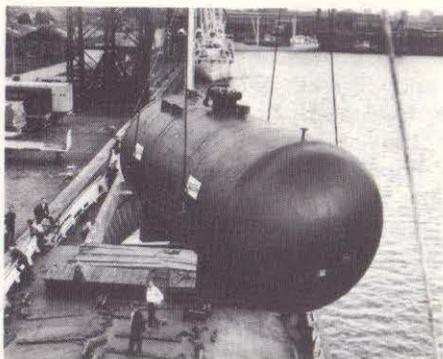
There was Shannon's gang, which was known as 'Barks' gang. They were all Irish and 'Barks' was a derogatory nickname in those days for Irishmen. Practically all the men below were Irish and they were all big, powerful lads and they worked really hard. They were great grafters. And a gentleman called Tommy Shannon was their gang boss. When they went on the call stand the foreman would shout - he knew which gang was in turn (they took it in turn to take the main hatch) - "Shannon's gang". And all the gang would walk out. If there was one man in that team that had just got in as a holiday replacement and he wasn't pulling his weight, the labour foreman would say, "Just go back, you're not with them". And he'd select someone else. They'd have somebody ear-marked, someone who was a good worker. It didn't happen often because they knew beforehand who was capable of doing what.

Comparisons between the gangs show, however, that not all



Russian timber ships double berthed at Preston for discharging in 1965.

(L.E.P.)



*A gas container bound for Belfast (1967).
The huge drum weighed eleven tons.
(L.E.P.)*

were more inclined to finish a conversation if the crane hook came over. It was a bit frustrating if you were working with them and wanted to make money! There was Blakelock's gang, a gentleman called Blakelock. They didn't have a regular hatchman. They just went to the side [of the call stand] where the hatchmen stood and the labour foreman would detail a hatchman off. They always made sure they had a good hatchman.

As Mr. Kellett has demonstrated earlier, before the card system was introduced the labour foreman could wield considerable power. He had good reason to remember one particular labour foreman for the harsh way in which he treated his father when he returned to the docks after a period of absence due to ill health.

I went to the window and asked to see the labour foreman. I told him my father was returning to work on the Monday and asked him if he could go in number one shed. The labour foreman said he must go where he's sent, he couldn't give him preferential treatment. My father would have to



*Number Three shed or 'Alcatraz', also
the pulp shed. (L.E.P.)*

were equally committed to the idea of unloading a ship at top speed.

There was Carter's gang and there was McGuire's gang. Carter's gang was known as 'the easy six' because they were quite content to make a reasonable living and they didn't believe in killing themselves like the Barks gang did. The Irish gang would work themselves to a standstill. But the easy six

go on the call stand on the Monday morning to be detailed for work. There were three older ones from the timber gang unfit to do piece-work, and he left them to the last three on the call stand. I should have been at my ship but I was waiting to take my father wherever they sent him. And they sent him to 'Alcatraz', which is the worst warehouse on the dock.

Alcatraz, or number three shed, was aptly named in remembrance of the famous American prison, for it was one of the coldest places on the dock, especially in the winter time. Hardly the place to send an elderly man who was recovering from an illness.

For many dockers advancing years brought their own hardships, as unable to cope with the pace demanded by the gangs seeking to maximise their earnings by securing bonuses for the speedy completion of work, the older men were forced to take jobs that were paid at the flat-rate of pay and their wages dwindled accordingly. Towards the years before the closure of the dock, the older men were allowed to sit in cabins while they waited for work, but when Mr. Kellett's father was seeking re-employment this 'luxury' was not available. With the others who were already facing the indignity of losing their chance at bonus wages he was forced to wait in the bitter cold of the Alcatraz warehouse.

Two days later there was snow on the ground and my father was trying to get up one of the stacks and he wouldn't give in. Alan Livesey, another labour foreman said, "Get in number one shed and I'll make it right."

As Mr. Kellett concludes, "that was the power that the labour foreman had to make life good or hell for a person".

Even for a docker at the height of his physical powers some cargoes were more difficult to unload than others. Many dockers particularly disliked the bag boats, so called because the cargo was all sacks - filled with anything from potatoes to fertiliser.

You can imagine a hold and there would be two decks on a ship mainly. The first one may be fifteen feet deep, packed solid with bags. And you had to dig down there, lift those bags up and put them in a sling. And you had to work your way down until you got to a flat surface . . . You had to handle every bag, depending upon what type of ship. If it was potatoes they were 56lbs mainly and in the olden days one cwt. sacks. Fertiliser could be one cwt. a piece and if they were plastic bags by the

end of the day your fingers would be pretty sore handling that type of thing. Once you had got down to the bottom of the deck you had to work right out and there was only the square of the hatch and underneath maybe ten or twenty feet before you reached the bulkhead. These bags would have to be lifted out or dragged by crane. But they weren't too keen on you dragging them by crane because it used to damage the bags. They'd sooner damage you and your back!

Dock work was often dangerous, with cranes swinging loads over the men's heads and railway waggons trundling along the quayside. Some spots were more dangerous to work than others.

We used to have a system if you were in a regular pulp gang, especially if you were working putting pulp to rail . . . when you would be working right on the quayside



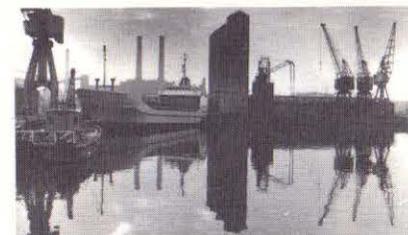
Men unloading sparto grass or alfalfa.
(News Chronicle, Manchester)

and under the cranes. As the crane came out of the ship's hold in a sling it went over the first pair of loaders' heads and he'd lower it down next to them. As they were working the crane came out with the next sling and he'd go over their heads again. So they were getting two slings over their heads to the other pair's one. So you had a system where you worked under the crane in turn.

If it was not a regular gang the men would toss to see who went under the crane and, as Mr. Kellett observes, it was just such a toss of a coin that one day saved his life.

We'd been working together for two or three days, but two men went off on holiday or something and he sent two men to work with us. They insisted on tossing up again and I said, "What difference does it make?". As it happened the pair that I was working got the toss and the other pair went under the crane. And one of these lads unfortunately got killed. We was putting pulp on the quayside, stacking it, and this motor waggon came on and the pair underneath the crane had to go and load it. And

that meant there were three slings going over their heads . . . The crane driver was using a mobile crane and his foot slipped off the brake I think, and it caught one of the men a glancing blow. But the other one, it dropped right on his head, this sling of pulp and it weighed a ton. Each bale weighed about four cwt. a piece.



A tranquil scene on the dock.
(L.E.P.)

As a mark of respect all the men walked off the dock when anyone was killed and did not return to work until the following day. For the widow there was little in the way of compensation, although the men themselves always organised a collection at the call stand to try and help the families of those killed or injured on the dock.

Although the work was hard and tiring there were few facilities for the men on the dock site.

There were no showers. There was a cabin that was a dining hall. It was a wooden structure like a giant hen cabin. They called it the 'black cabin'. The only washing facility was a lean-to at the back with a row of cold water taps and enamel basins. So you just had a swill before your lunch. You can imagine what it was like if you'd been working on coal or china clay or pitch. Later on the Corporation was compelled to build a new toilet block, a locker room, showers, changing facilities and everything.

For much of the time during which Mr. Kellett worked at Preston there were no catering facilities.

The canteen in the old days was the Seamen's Mission, right near the black cabin. The seamen used one side of it. There was a billiard table and rest room. On the other side was a canteen which the dockers used. But it was run by the Seamen's Mission.

There were, however, plenty of cafes within walking distance of the dock and those who brought sandwiches could eat them in the black cabin, where there was also a big boiler which could be used to make tea. If the men were working any dist-



A sad end: one of the landmarks on the dock site after closure, the grain silo is demolished. (L.E.P.)

ance away from the tea-making facilities one man, usually the capstan man, would be sent on his bike to fetch the tea for his mates. Mr. Kellett recalls one journey which did not go as smoothly as planned.

I had a racing bike and I went down one day. As I was coming back round the weighbridge there were railway metals that used to cross the road and they were treacherous. All of a sudden the wheels just went from under me and all the cans went flying and the hot tea went up my arm. And when I got back . . . and they were all waiting for their cans and there were no cans. Well there were cans but they were all empty. I was called some nasty names that day.

The hard work and dirty and dangerous conditions engendered a spirit of comradeship that spilled over into social life and it continues today, even though the dock has closed. The Preston dockers were justly proud of their skill and the port held the record for the fastest turn round of a ship in the country. Mr. Lee, who was working on the day the record was set, recalls the manager's reaction to the figures when he returned to the office after the weekend.

The boss sent for the books on the Monday because he wouldn't believe how many standard of timber we'd got out. The slings was so massive that instead of having two men to a truck, they'd knocked one truck off and split the two men to help push the truck where it was going to the stacks to be unloaded. And the trucks had

car-tyre wheels and when they landed the sling on it they were nearly flat there was so much weight on . . . The boss wouldn't believe it. "You've made a mistake", he said to the checkers. But it was right. It was a record.

Mr. Lee concludes, "You'll never find that comradeship anywhere again."

THE END

How you can be involved

This booklet represents only a selection of the work being undertaken by the Community History Project. As well as the Docks History Group, we are also involved in a major project to recover details of the lives of Lancashire textile workers using oral, written and photographic evidence. This will also be the subject of booklets and exhibitions. There are many ways in which you can become involved in the projects which are underway.

You may have your own story to tell. Perhaps you have already thought of writing about your experiences but have not known where to begin. If so, we would like to hear from you. On the other hand, you might be interested in becoming involved as an interviewer yourself, recording the details of history as recounted by those who lived it. Again we would welcome your support.

If you would like to know more about ways in which you can be involved in any of the projects or to be kept informed about new developments in the work of the Community History Project, please contact us at the School of Historical and Critical Studies, Lancashire Polytechnic, Preston.

In 1985, a group of ex-dock workers from Preston came together to talk and write about their experiences of working on Preston dock. In co-operation with the Community History Project based at Lancashire Polytechnic, the group have produced a history of Preston dock as seen by the people who once worked there. This is the first booklet in a series detailing the results of their work.



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