

A view from underneath the AONB not normally on public display!

Arnside's boat building history

by Andy Pringle

In the warmer months you might be lucky enough to see two or three dinghies sailing on the tide at Arnside, a gentle reminder of our rich nautical heritage.

The Bay is of course well known as a crossing point to the Furness peninsula, but a lot of goods went in and out of the estuaries too. Ocean going ships up to 200 tons are recorded as having been built in the area; although most of the locally built ships would have been smaller 'flats' designed for estuary and navigable river work. These shallow drafted craft were used to carry stone, lime, gunpowder, wool, flax, cotton, iron products, coal etc. in and out of Liverpool, but more often to waiting larger ships on Cartmel Wharf (the mud flats on the other side of Humphrey Head).

Commercial shipping continued until the 1890's with stone being shipped from the quarry at Blackstone point, but the canal quay at Hest Bank (1824) and then the Kent Viaduct (1857) eventually put an end to all that. However, fishing carried on well into the twentieth century.

The same railway that finished off commercial shipping brought in holiday makers and took the freshly caught fish to market. This meant

there was still a need for fishing boats and pleasure craft; and the Crossfield family of Arnside built the best.

Originally born in Lancaster in 1782, John Crossfield, a ship's carpenter, moved first to Milnthorpe and then to Arnside in 1817/18. He had two sons Thomas and Francis John who joined him as general joiners making everything the village needed; from laths and building joinery to barrels, coffins and marine repairs. Francis John built his first boat in 1838 and remained in Arnside until his death in 1899. He was married twice, first to Jane, then Mary and had five sons born between 1840-57: William, Francis James, Thomas, John and George.

Thomas, who specialised in building houses had three sons: Francis John II, James and Thomas. Francis John II, who married Margaret Gibson from Arnside Tower Farm, concentrated on marine repairs and boat building. He worked alongside his uncle Francis John I consolidating the boat building, moving from an open air site around the back of the present day Coast Office to 'The Top Shop' on Church Hill in 1860, opposite the El, which was until recently Les Earl's joinery workshop. Launching a 30 foot boat from Church Hill

must have been quite a sight! Francis John later moved to Barrow making his fortune running a timber yard, which was eventually inherited by his grandson Robin.

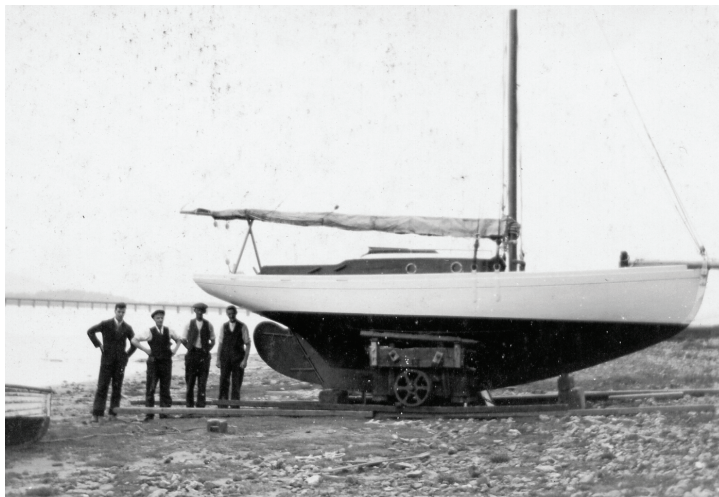
Brother James opened a grocery store with his mother on the Promenade (now the restaurant Gado Gado).

Four of Francis John I's sons, William, Francis James, John and George ran the boat yard next. In 1892 or 93 William built the new Yard at a more convenient location at the end of Beach Walk, (next to the Coastguard station). William is also credited with all the design work on the Lloyd's List of Yachts. They advertised themselves in 1898 as 'Joiners, Undertakers, Builders, Yacht and Boat Builders' keeping on the Top Shop until WWI for general joinery work. Around this time (possibly as early as 1906) John moved to Conwy and set up another successful 'Crossfield's Boatyard'. After George died in 1909, his two sons, George and Herbert took over the boatyard before moving to Hoylake, again building boats in 1914.

William's sons, Fred and William carried on building the famous prawners, racing yachts, rowing boats, day boats and steam launches



Image: The Crossfields working hard in the 'Top Shop'.



at Beach Walk. William died in 1941 and Fred retired in 1950, bringing an end to the astonishing boatbuilding Crossfields. The average prawner was 35' long with a beam of 10' 6" and a draft of 5'. They carried an astonishing 900 square feet of sail and were normally crewed by just two people!

Crossfields is also said to have built the famous 'Swallow' for Arthur Ransome in 1934, and brought back to Arnside by John Barnes in the 1950's for Earnseat School. The last prawner built by the Crossfields was the 32' 'Helen' in 1938. A similar vessel 'Sir William Priestley', built

for the Morecambe and Heysham Fishermen's Lifeboat Association in 1934, can be seen at The Lancaster Maritime Museum along with a model of the Boatyard.

John Gill and then John Duerden ran the boatyard until the 1980's building other pleasure boats and maintaining cruisers and their moorings. The last boat built at the Boatyard was probably 'Sandpiper', a 12' 6" National Graduate racing dinghy, which was successfully raced by John's sons John and Richard Duerden.

The Boatyard is resting at the

moment, but it is hoped that soon it can be put to good use again. Arnside Sailing Club and friends are proposing to buy a 1912 Crossfields yacht and bring her home. I can't think of a better place for her to be.

References

'Kendal's Port' Leonard Smith.

'The Lancashire Nobby' Nick Millar

'New Lateglacial fauna and early Mesolithic human remains from northern England' Smith, Wilkinson

Images (clockwise from top left): (1) Boat trippers with Fred Crossfield (1912), (2) Fred Crossfield with Peter Barnes, (3) The Swallow on the Kent estuary, (4) The Nanette (1933).