

TROZE

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# Cornish Dockers: Their Companies, Cargoes and Consequences

*By Terry Chapman*

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## *TROZE*

Troze is the journal of the National Maritime Museum Cornwall whose mission is to promote an understanding of small boats and their place in people's lives, and of the maritime history of Cornwall.

'Troze: the sound made by water about the bows of a boat in motion'  
From R. Morton Nance, *A Glossary of Cornish Sea Words*

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### **Terry Chapman**

Terry Chapman joined the Royal Navy from school as an apprentice. Retiring as a Commander after a full career, he read Contemporary History with English at University of Plymouth. He now maintains an amateur interest in researching, writing and speaking around his PhD thesis on the National Dock Labour Scheme in Cornwall awarded by the University of Exeter's Institute of Cornish Studies.

# Cornish Dockers: Their Companies, Cargoes and Consequences

*Terry Chapman*

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## Introduction

Until the Second World War, employment on Britain's docks was largely casual. An old adage ran: Dockers were employed by somebody one day; somebody else the next, and nobody the day after. The uncertainty of dockers' employment was open to abuse by both unscrupulous bosses and gang-masters, and was further undermined during times of economic depression such as the 1930s. The particularity of ending pre-war vulnerability in the port transport industry can perhaps be seen as part of the general promise of social reform made by Attlee's post-war Government. The National Dock Labour Scheme (NDLS) was established in 1947, from the same mix of practical and ideological imperatives that produced a 'cradle to grave' welfare state and took public control of the economy's commanding heights. The NDLS like the latter and, some might argue much of the former, was abolished under the different ideological stance of Mrs Thatcher's Government in the late 1980s. As attempts were made to keep the NDLS abreast of changing cargo-handling technology in the intervening four decades, the Scheme reflected both a bigger industrial as well as political picture. The aim here, however, is to tell the story of the NDLS at the local level by concentrating more on the industry that it supported and, while politics cannot be ignored completely, an attempt has been made to keep them to a minimum.<sup>1</sup>

Having first outlined the extent of the NDLS, the Scheme's three phase development is then traced. Discussion of each phase combines a brief sketch of the personality considered to have shaped that phase, together with local examples of the type of shipping then operating. In conclusion, the Scheme's local impact is assessed.

## Statutory Extent of the National Dock Labour Scheme

It is important to remember that the NDLS, having been established by Act of Parliament (Dock Workers (Regulation of Employment) Scheme, 1947) and therefore upheld by law, both men and employers were bound by the Scheme's provisions. Over 80 ports, including most of the major ones and many smaller ones such as those in Cornwall later discussed, were originally included in the Scheme. To work in those ports, men, for they were all men, had to be entered on the Scheme's Register. Within the defined area of Scheme ports, only Registered Dock Workers (RDW) could land or load cargo: that was all cargo, the only exceptions being liquids and fresh fish catches. While there was inevitably scope for disagreement over the definition of 'cargo', even the delineation of a port's area became more contentious once the filling and emptying of containers could be conducted elsewhere in so-called 'dry-ports'.

The post war NDLS under discussion here was built on the National Dock Labour Corporation (NDLC) established to run the vital docks during the Second World War. The wartime Corporation's organisational structure, which comprised a national joint committee made up of employers and men represented by their union, the Transport and General Workers, co-ordinating similarly constituted regional committees was continued in the post-war Scheme. Under this local control with central co-ordination, RDW numbers were linked to port activity levels, which meant that while such levels supported their registration, men were guaranteed employment complete with fall-back pay when, through no fault of theirs, there was no work. To use a Scheme port, and therefore its RDW, employers had also to be registered.

Trying to use members of a ship's crew or employees of a parent company to handle cargo in a Scheme port was likely to result in an altercation with the dockers at the least, or at worst, expulsion from the Scheme and thereby denial of its facilities. Compliance was, therefore, usually forthcoming. Costs of the Scheme, including the fall-back or maintenance payment, were met from a levy on the wages paid by employers to their allocated RDW. Since the Scheme was jointly administered, any changes had to be jointly agreed. There was, therefore, an inherent tension in the Scheme, with employers anxious to reduce its scope and dockers keen, and not always through their union, to maintain the protection it provided. While not all might agree with Corelli Barnett's view of post-war dockers as Britain's 'bloody-minded gatekeepers', a prime local example of the port transport industry's fractiousness might be the mass demonstration through St Austell by china-clay workers protesting at the impact of the 1972 national dock strike on their already beleaguered industry.<sup>2</sup> It is perhaps therefore important to remember how and why the Scheme was first established.

### Bevin and Companies and Cargoes in the NDLS Early Years

Ernest Bevin (1881 - 1951) is generally recognised as the architect of the NDLS. A remarkable man, who was born in poverty, and unskilled, worked around Bristol Docks where he first became involved in trade unionism, and was therefore active in a prototype joint committee established to run the docks during the First World War. Between the Wars as he rose through the ranks of the trades' union movement he continued to work to improve the lot of casual dock workers - those whose weak position suffered further during the bleak years of high unemployment. By the outbreak of the Second World War, Bevin was the most powerful trades' unionist in the country and as such was invited, shrewdly, by Churchill to become Minister of Labour in the Wartime Coalition Cabinet. Among the many things that he did using the extensive powers conferred on the post, which arguably were crucial in winning the War, was to introduce the earlier mentioned NDLC. This wartime necessity laid the foundations of the post war NDLS under discussion here. Bevin became Attlee's Foreign Secretary after the War, and played an important part in shaping the post-war world, but here the interest is only in the inter-war and wartime parts of his remarkable career.

With road transport nowhere near as dominant as it is today, and while a lot of freight was moved by rail before the Second World War, coastal shipping was then also much more important. Analogies with today's ubiquitous road-hauliers can perhaps be drawn. In the years up to and just after the War there were national shipping concerns working like today's national lorry operators, with similar but smaller firms offering the same type of general carrying service at the local level. There were also firms which, although not primarily in the transport business, operated shipping in support of their main activity.<sup>3</sup> In the days before the First World War, one such of this latter group operating in Cornwall was, Hoskens Trevithick and Polkinghorne (HTP). Originally three local firms with similar milling interests, when combined, HTP while continuing as millers, expanded into agricultural supply and engineering, and road and marine transport.



Figure 1: Residential conversion of Hoskens Trevithick and Polkinghorne (HTP) Ltd barley mill dated 1911 on Poltisco Wharf, Truro

Source: Author

Today's customers of the supermarket on Garras Wharf in Truro will be familiar with the tall thin building (shown in Figure 1), originally a barley mill, built in 1911, just across the River Allen, now converted into riverside apartments. A letter-head in the Cornwall Record Office (CRO) shows that HTP owned the Liverpool, Bristol and Hayle Steamship Co. with offices in each of those ports.<sup>4</sup> While the subsidiary does not appear in the period's *Lloyd's Register*, the conjoined parent company first appears as ship-owners in 1890, the year of amalgamation, operating just one ship, the *Norseman*. That ship was replaced in the early twentieth century by the Belfast-built steamer *M J Hedley*, (165 feet and 449 tons), with the Newcastle built steamer *Cornubia* of roughly the same size joining the fleet soon after. As well as transporting company products to their other big mill in Millbay, Plymouth, and further afield to France and the Channel Isles, the ships also provided a weekly passenger service between the ports of the company's name. Both ships stayed with the company until disposal during the First World War, when pressure of operating shipping during hostilities is thought likely to have influenced the decision to wind up the company's shipping arm. HTP did, however, continue its land-based operations until after the Second World War, before separating its agricultural and engineering divisions.<sup>5</sup>

HTP provides one example of a local company operating shipping in support of its primary activity during the early twentieth century; the fuel-merchants J. H. Bennett of Penzance would be another. In his recent analysis of Cornish cargo shipping of the period, R Fenton finds two of the local general freighting fleets, those of Edward Hain and Richard Chellew, as significant as any of those then based in Britain's major tramp operating ports.<sup>6</sup> The Hain story is perhaps better known, not least because of the splendid room dedicated to the fleet in the St Ives Museum, so Chellew (pronounced 'Shelloo') of Truro

will in this instance be taken as the example of the period's local general freighters.

Much as with Hain, the Chellev fleet started as a collection of single-ship companies in the late nineteenth century. Their steam fleet, including the *Penwith* and *Penpol*, built by Harvey of Hayle, illustrate the company's adopted naming policy of using the Cornish prefix: Pen. With an office in Cardiff, the company's main trade was in Welsh coal out to the Mediterranean and on to India or to South America, and grain back to various British and nearby European ports. After losing five of their eighteen ships to the enemy, a single company was formed after the First World War, R.B. Chellev Steam Navigation Co. Control passed to a Cardiff based company in 1920, before it in turn passed to the London based Chellev Steam Navigation Co. Ltd. During the subsequent Depression, some of the new company's fleet joined the numerous Hain ships laid up in the Truro rivers with others flagged out to Gibraltar in an attempt to escape the period's disastrous trading conditions. Of the combined London and Gibraltar based fleet of eleven that entered the Second World War, one was captured and five again lost. The one remaining Gibraltar ship was disposed of, and the three survivors, the *Pencarrow*, *Pendeen* and *Penhale*, were joined by the *Pentire*, (ex-Liberty Ship *Samnebra*) to sail on into the 1950s. The once proud Cornish fleet of Chellev was then bought out and the name finally disappeared.<sup>7</sup> Those familiar with it will recognise many parallels with the Hain story. Such local companies progressed through sail to steam to motor ships before being bought out by larger national concerns. As will be seen in later discussion, these too were in turn to succumb to combined economic and industrial pressure.

As earlier noted, while rising through the trades' union movement between the Wars, Bevin continued to campaign to end dockland's exploitative casual labour practices. Registration underpinned by maintenance were considered the lynch-pins of such protection, and were incorporated into both the wartime precursor NDLC and post-war NDLS under discussion here. It might usefully be recalled that the immediate post-war years, the years when faith in state-sponsored administration has perhaps never been higher, were hardly ones in which evidently successful wartime arrangements would be lightly discarded.<sup>8</sup> So, much in accord with the mood of the times, the NDLS took over from the NDLC almost seamlessly in 1947.

Initially the NDLS administered more than three hundred and sixty RDW in Cornwall. Men would be distributed as needed around the thirteen Cornish scheme ports, which can perhaps be divided into two main groups: clay ports in the east and general trading ports in the west. The three in the east, Fowey, Par and smaller Charlestown, were still handling china-clay almost exclusively when the Scheme was abolished in 1989. Of the general ports in the west, Falmouth, Truro and Penzance were also still trading at abolition but at a much reduced level; Hayle, Penryn, Portreath and Porthleven all ceased operations during the Scheme's span. St Ives, Mousehole and Newlyn were nominally included, but there is no recorded discussion of their operations in the minutes of the Scheme's Local Board held in the CRO.<sup>9</sup> A summary of Cornwall's NDLS ports in 1947 and their position in 1989 is given in Table 1.

Table 1 Cornwall's NDLS Ports

<b>NDLC to NDLS Ports in 1947</b>	<b>Position on Abolition in 1989</b>
Fowey, Par and Charlestown	Still almost exclusively trading china-clay. Charlestown much smaller, and with Par, since closed.
Falmouth, Truro and Penzance	Still general trading but at much reduced level.
Hayle, Penryn, Portreath and Porthleven	End of trading life reached during NDLS span.
Mousehole, Newlyn and St Ives	Very little trade during NDLS span.

Source: National Archive: BK 1/54 dated 1 Oct 1943

Soon after its establishment, the Scheme's joint Local Board was authorised by the National to build two headquarters to reflect the geographic and industrial split between Cornwall's trading ports. Both are substantial buildings. Although now residential, the eastern NDLS(C) headquarters at the further end of Fore Street in Fowey (Figure 2) can still be recognised by its distinctive rounded corner window. In the west, the very similar building currently owned by graphic-designers, is in Falmouth at the Kimberley Park end of Trevethen Road (Figure 3).



Figure 2: Now residential, this was the eastern headquarters of NDLS in Cornwall at far end of Fore Street, Fowey

Source: Author



Figure 3: Until recently, occupied by a graphic design firm, this was the western headquarters of NDLS in Cornwall at Kimberley Park end of Trevethen Road, Falmouth.

Source: Author

The post-war years, the years of transition between NDLC and NDLS, were a torrid time for Britain's port transport industry. While Cornwall may have been fortunate in escaping much of the upheaval, one estimate is that over two million man-days were lost in various disputes in our major ports during the Attlee years.<sup>10</sup> The differing levels of industrial action between smaller ports, like Cornwall's, and the larger, were examined in a study by P. Turnbull and others. They found that while local factors in dispute could be exacerbated during periods of national change, there might also have been an underlying difference in attitudes to the Scheme. Simplifying, they found that in larger ports the less beneficial aspects of the scheme as far as the dockers were concerned, such as work allocation, regulated hours and its disciplinary code, could outweigh the benefits, and disruption was consequently more prevalent. Perceptions in smaller ports, however, were that the benefits of regular work, holiday pay, sports and medical facilities and so on outweighed the negative aspects of the Scheme, and disruption was therefore less likely.<sup>11</sup>

The Conservative Government, initially under Churchill, sought to sustain economic recovery by avoiding the sort of industrial conflict suffered by Labour under Attlee. Nevertheless, it was a further flurry of dockland disruption in the mid-1950s that prompted Conservative Prime Minister Macmillan to invite Judge Devlin to investigate ways of reducing the turbulence.<sup>12</sup> This first of his two inquiries concluded that much of the tension was caused by the employers' continuing resistance to the NDLS system of joint administration. With a consequent softening of this attitude, things did calm down, only to flare up again in the early 1960s, this time ostensibly

over pay. Lord Devlin, as he had by then become, was again invited to examine reasons behind the disruption by Labour Prime Minister Wilson. Devlin's later recommendations, even though far more radical, for reasons discussed below, arguably still failed to pacify fully the port transport industry.

### Devlin and Companies and Cargoes in the NDLS Mid-Years

Patrick, Lord Chief Justice Devlin (1905 – 1992) was an Appeal Court Judge of Catholic Irish/Scots descent. He is chiefly remembered for advocating the retention of links between the law and personal morality, for investigating accusations of abuses of power in what is now Malawi, and latterly for campaigning against miscarriages of justice.<sup>13</sup> Here, however, the interest is in the already mentioned two inquiries he conducted into disruption on the docks. The first of these has perhaps been sufficiently discussed above, but because of its more far-reaching implications, the second needs rather more detailed consideration.

Devlin's second dock inquiry produced recommendations in two parts.<sup>14</sup> Broadly, the first group aimed to restructure NDLS pay and the second tried to modernise (and slim) the Scheme ready for advances in cargo handling. Much of the original Scheme was left intact, with the one big organizational change being that, rather than being employed by the Scheme and then loaned to employers as necessary, in future men would be permanently allocated to specific employers. Locally, this effort, aimed at ending casualism and engendering more mutual loyalty, confirms the earlier discussed spatial and industrial division of Cornwall's trading ports. In the smallest of the eastern clay ports, Charlestown, only three men were allocated to the operating company Charlestown Estate Ltd with over a hundred more divided roughly equally between British Railways at Fowey and the Port of Par Ltd (a subsidiary of English China Clays (ECC)). The seven companies operating through the five western general ports then still operating in Cornwall were allocated a total of just over forty men between them. In other words, changing trade patterns had halved the number of RDW in Cornwall over the preceding two decades, until by 1967 both Par and Fowey (Table 2) each had more men than the remaining western ports combined.<sup>15</sup>

Table 2 Registered Dock Worker Distribution in 1967

East		West	
British Railways, Fowey	57	Falmouth Docks	10
Port of Par Ltd	47	Coast Lines Ltd	3
Charlestown Est. Ltd	3	Harris Bros	1
	<u>107</u>		
		Harvey's (Truro)	4
		Bennett's	3
		Isles of Scilly SSC	10
		Harvey's (Hayle)	<u>11</u>
	<u>42</u>		42
<b>Total</b>	<u>149</u>		

Source: Falmouth Local History and Research Project

While some metalliferous ore, quarried and agricultural products, plus scrap metal was going out via western ports, most remaining trade – timber, cement, grain, fertiliser and feed – was inbound. The big change, however, had been in the need to import coal

for power generation. Sea delivered coal was burnt in the three gas-works at Falmouth, Truro and Penzance still remaining after the rationalisation that followed post-war nationalisation of the gas industry. Hayle's electricity generating station had also used coal, making Hayle for many years Cornwall's biggest coal entrée-port, Figure 4. But as cheaper, cleaner, more convenient energy sources came on-stream, so all Cornwall's gas-works and its power station closed. With their closure went the need for dockers to heave industrial amounts of coal.



Figure 4: Unidentified collier supplying electricity generating station on North Quay, Hayle. Thought obviously to have been taken before closure in early 1970s, but after introduction of diesel cranes in the mid 1950s

Source: Royal Institution of Cornwall

At the same time as this decline in general trade through Cornwall's western ports, china-clay output through the eastern ports had grown to a point where the main extractive company briefly experimented in running its own shipping operation. In the early 1960s, ECC established the Western Shipping Co., co-locating the subsidiary with a small Jersey-based operator and buying one of their ships. Re-naming the Dutch built *Fauvic* (167 feet and 485 tons) the *Meledor*, they bought another Dutch ship of similar size, the *Lijnbaasgracht*, before fortunately, (for English speakers), re-naming it the *Treviscoe*, after another clay pit. However, the venture came to an abrupt end following the loss of the *Meledor* in collision off Rouen outbound with clay from Par in 1965. The remaining ship and the short-lived Western Shipping Co. were transferred to their co-habitueés in Jersey, both the ship and that company had also disappeared from *Lloyds* by the end of the decade <sup>16</sup>

Records of such local fleets frequently show their ships carrying clay out and coal on return; while national concerns, chief among which were F.T. Everard, and Coast Lines, reverse this and show coal out with clay (or road stone) back. F.T. Everard, originally Thames bargemen of Rotherhithe, became the foremost carriers of coal for Cornwall's gas and power stations when operating, before moving into tankers and only recently being bought out by the James Fisher Group. Figure 5 shows the Everard vessel *Activity* waiting a return cargo of china-clay in Charlestown.



Figure 5: Having probably brought coal down for Cornwall's gas or power stations, Everards' *Activity* waiting a return cargo of china-clay in Charlestown. Specialising in the route, many Everards' ships' names began with an 'A' and ended in the suffix 'ity'.

Source: Royal Institution of Cornwall

The Liverpool-based national carrier Coast Lines grew rapidly after World War One by absorbing smaller local concerns, one of which was the coastal liner Little Western Steamship Co. of Penzance. Before the Second World War, Coast Lines had established wharves in Falmouth, Truro and Penzance, and by the 1950s, when operating over a hundred ships, was considered to dominate British coastal shipping.<sup>17</sup> Not too long after that, they too went the way of earlier discussed local fleets Chellew and Hain, being taken over by consortia with the resources to invest in what most commentators see as the 'shipping revolution' of the third quarter of the twentieth century. Two parts of that revolution, the demise of passenger liners and bigger but fewer tankers, do not bear directly on this narrative; but the final part, the move from 'break-bulk' carriers in which cargo was separately stowed, to containerised cargo most certainly does.

Nominally, the aim of Devlin's second dock inquiry was to reduce industrial disputes, but underlying that was the need to modernise the industry in preparation for the upheaval of containerisation.<sup>18</sup> If subsequent critics found the attempt in this regard a failure, it is perhaps worth remembering that not only was it difficult to envisage the scale of this massive industrial change, but that the policies of successive governments might also have played a part. Under the economic policy of the commissioners of Devlin's second inquiry, Wilson's Labour Government, pay increases had to be paid for by increases in productivity. Consequently, Devlin's recommended pay-rise for dockers was conditional on the ending of vexatious piece-work and their so-called 'restrictive practices'. This was inevitably contentious for the dockers, and in 1970 Britain suffered its first national dock strike since the 1926 General Strike, by which time Heath's Conservatives were actually in office. Their subsequent industrial policy included legal sanctions against strikers, as a result of which the jailing of the 'Pentonville Five' (five dockers accused of illegally picketing a London cold-store) triggered the national dock strike with earlier discussed local impact in 1972. With the threat of industrial uproar far beyond the docks, the Government could be said to have capitulated firstly in face of the dockers, and subsequently and more disastrously in electoral terms, in face of the miners. Devlin may not have gone far enough industrially, but in the prevailing political climate, he probably went as far as he could.<sup>19</sup>

Both national dock strikes were felt locally; the second perhaps more so than the first and inevitably given the trade imbalance, more in the eastern ports than the west.

But the strikes' impact and resolution will be passed over here to concentrate more on the underlying cause of the clashes: the threat to dockers' jobs posed by container traffic.

Capital-intensive container operations need acres more space than labour intensive break-bulk, and so, as new specialised ships entered service, correspondingly specialised shore-side handling facilities were built and manned at a much lower level. New ports such as Felixstowe, where containers are craned over the 'water-window', the gap between ship and quayside, and Dover where container carrying lorries roll on and off 'Ro-Ro' ferries, saw more and more freight traffic while conventional ports saw a corresponding decline in their tonnage. While registered dockers did win some protection in the vicinity of existing Scheme ports, operators in the new specialised ports employing a fraction of previous manpower levels successfully resisted inclusion in the NDLS.

Bulk cargoes, such as coal and for Cornwall, china-clay, were of course largely unaffected by containerisation. So while Cornwall's eastern ports maintained their conventionally-manned output of bulk clay, attempts were made in the west to join the container revolution. A container terminal in Falmouth was first given Parliamentary approval and ambivalent local support in the early 1970s. Little progress was actually made, and renewal of the approval ten years later met more strident opposition. Part of the protest was of course by then environmental, but there was also considerable opposition to the proposal on economic grounds. How would, the argument ran, the loading of containers on and off extended road and rail links help the economy of Cornwall? As the debate continued, sections of Falmouth Docks changed hands and the new owner's refusal to grant previously agreed access sealed the fate, for now at least, of Falmouth's container terminal.<sup>20</sup>

### Thatcher and the end of the NDLS

Many commentators accept that for more than thirty years after the end of the Second World War, Britain's two main political parties agreed on the policy end, if not necessarily the means, of securing full employment in a mixed economy. The arrival of Prime Minister Mrs Thatcher's government in 1979 is usually taken as the end of that consensus.<sup>21</sup> The preceding Labour Administration had incurred considerable unpopularity through its perceived inability to control inflation and the trades' unions, culminating in what is now almost universally referred to as the 'Winter of Discontent' of 1978-9. Mrs Thatcher espoused individual responsibility in a free enterprise economy, which included the incremental, some might even say Draconian, trimming of trades' union powers. As a result there were only sporadic dock strikes in support of the miners during their long and bitter dispute of 1984-85, and again very few even when moves were later made to abolish the NDLS. Gone, at the political level, were the days when 'industrial might' could threaten a government as it had Heath's. While at the industrial level, the reduced number of registered dockers as a result of the industry's slimming under financial inducements after Devlin confirmed to port employers that the tide had now turned in favour of finally ending the NDLS.

In the early 1950s, when the Scheme's National Board first collated numbers from its regions, there were just fewer than 90,000 RDWs nationally. The trend was then steadily downward, with a step down across the Devlin years, to leave fewer than 10,000 when the Scheme ended. Against this national picture, Cornwall's numbers are compared in Figure 6 with two other regions employing similar numbers across several ports: Ayr, and Medway and Swale in Kent. In the 'golden triangle' of South East England, the latter defied the national trend, and the numbers of RDW increased during the Scheme's span, while in Cornwall and Ayr numbers mirrored the overall downward pattern. Diminishing general trade meant that Ayr's ports actually ceased to be Scheme ports ten or so years before abolition. In Cornwall, as previously discussed, the decline in general trade left only very small numbers of RDW in the still trading western ports. But for the last half of the Scheme's life, the numbers registered in the east to handle bulk clay remained almost constant, drifting slightly below one hundred

towards abolition.<sup>22</sup> Numbers of RDW in Cornwall became, and perhaps always were, almost directly linked to the needs of the china-clay industry.

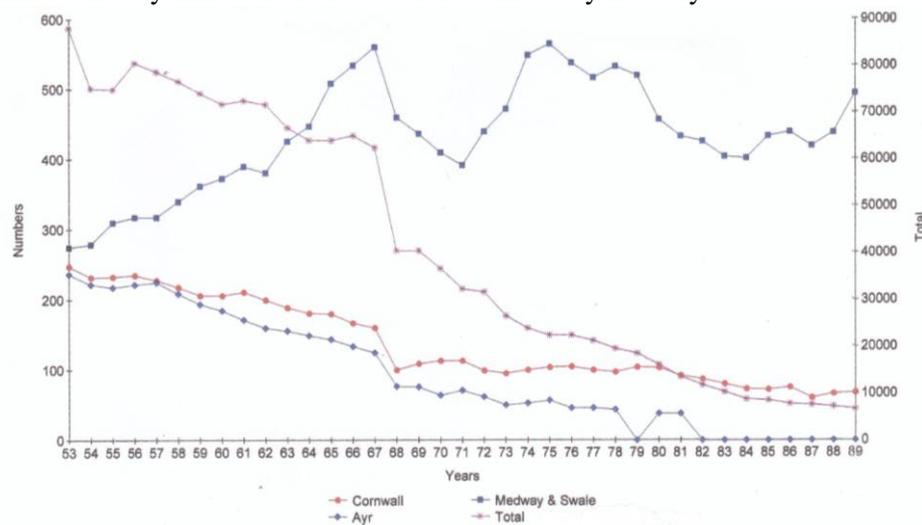


Figure 6: Numbers Employed as Registered Dock Workers Nationally and in Cornwall, Ayr and Medway & Swale

Source: National Archive: BK 2/1237 - 1239

Having been active in seeking the Scheme's demise, the port operating arm of ECC took the opportunity on abolition to reduce what they believed had become a burdensome dock labour force. About one sixth of the total then registered were retained, with others offered either posts in the parent company or compensated redundancy.<sup>23</sup> The few RDW in western ports are thought likely to have been offered similar opportunities within parent concerns, or severance. A study commissioned by the Government four years after abolition found the main beneficiaries to have been major ex-scheme ports at the expense of the smaller; and that the port transport industry had undergone massive changes in manning levels, working practices and industrial relations. The report also found that investment had been deferred in several Scheme ports until after abolition, including delays to new clay and grain handling facilities in the main china-clay ports.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

Following a brief outline of the extent of the NDLS, this paper sought to trace the Scheme from its origins, through the years of attempted modernisation to eventual abolition. The personalities and politics that shaped the Scheme's development were set amid local examples of the shipping operating during each of the Scheme's three phases.

The seeds of the Scheme were shown to have germinated during the First World War, when Ernest Bevin was starting his rise through the trades' union movement; when HTP Ltd was operating a small fleet in support of their agricultural trading, and the Chellew fleet offered a locally based general cargo service. As Minister of Labour during World War Two, Bevin established the NDLC to run the docks, and from the wartime NDLC grew the post-war NDLS discussed here. With the increase in road transport after the War, Cornwall's trading ports in two loose groups with national fleets such as Everard and Coast Lines carrying general cargo through western ports, and china-clay through the eastern. Then, as china-clay output remained nominally constant in the east, a decline in general trade in the west was accelerated when closure of gas and power stations ended the industrial demand for coal. Lord Devlin twice conducted inquiries into disquiet in the port transport industry; once in the mid-1950s, and again ten years later. Devlin's more influential second inquiry changed the Scheme from a system where men were allocated as necessary, to one with their permanent attachment to specific employers. This confirmed the divergence between

Cornwall's two port groupings with, by the end of the 1960s, each of the two main eastern port employers being assigned more men than all the remaining western employers combined. The unsuccessful attempt to build a container terminal in Falmouth was not affected by Devlin's other proposals which were not, however, radical enough to prepare the industry fully for the upheaval of containerisation. Mrs Thatcher came to office promising to curb trades' union power as part of an effort to control inflation. Having seen her Government's resolve when facing the miners, port employers moved to end what they had perhaps always seen as the restrictive NDLS. On abolition and without affecting clay output, the one main remaining local major port employer reduced its docker establishment to a fraction of those registered.

Bevin could not foresee the massive social changes that followed the Second World War, and consequently, the NDLS he designed to solve problems of the past could not really prepare the port transport industry for that changed future. Twenty years into that future, Devlin was perhaps under some political pressures, similarly unable to foresee the enormous industrial changes involved in containerisation. And so, much like Bevin, his solutions for the industry's past failed to ready it for the future. Mrs Thatcher could perhaps later see that a Scheme born of good intent when casually employed dockers were open to abuse, had outlived its usefulness when employers had become open to what might almost be considered the abuses of over-manning, resistance to technology and other restrictive practises. Lamenting its passing, the earlier cited Turnbull, a supporter of the Scheme, believed that with abolition, 'coerced compliance' had replaced what he viewed as the men's previous 'co-operative commitment'.<sup>25</sup> Many employers might be said never to have really reached co-operative commitment and afforded only coerced compliance throughout the Scheme's existence.

Containerisation made ships part of an integrated transport system. Cargoes increasingly moved to that more efficient system, with containers handled through specially equipped ports operating outside the NDLS. Conventional ports saw a corresponding decline in their tonnage, and consequently, their manning levels. While the merits of Falmouth's earlier projected container terminal can still be debated, there was insufficient support at the time, and only the decline in break-bulk trade part of this pattern was reflected in Cornwall. For west Cornish ports, therefore, changing national trade had greater consequence than the NDLS. Bulk cargoes such as coal were largely unaffected by the shift, and so, although Cornwall had ceased to need coal for power generation, clay through the County's eastern ports remained under the sway of the NDLS. In the east then, where the Scheme had come to be seen as something of an impediment, abolition was actively sought and eventually welcomed by the employer. Subsequently of course, international market conditions have had a far greater impact on Cornwall's china-clay industry: not least in the recent closure of Par, to leave only Fowey exporting its now much-reduced output.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The three elements of Britain's maritime industry, ports including the NDLS, ship building and shipping, are examined in A. Jamison, *Ebb Tide in the British Maritime Industries: Change and Adaptation 1918 - 1990*, (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2003)

<sup>2</sup> C. Barnett, *The Lost Victory: British Dreams, British Realities 1945 - 1950*, (London: Macmillan, 1995) p. 267; *West Briton*, 10 August 1972, p.1

<sup>3</sup> H.J. Dyos and D.H. Aldercroft, *British Transport: An Economic Perspective from the Seventeenth to Twentieth Century*, (Middlesex: Penguin, 1969)

<sup>4</sup> Cornwall Record Office (CRO) DDX 401/68

<sup>5</sup> V. Acton, 'Trade and Industry in Edwardian Truro' in *Edwardian Truro* ed. J. Palmer (Exeter: Exeter University, 1994) p.17; R. Fenton 'Cornish Steam Ships and Owners: the View from England' in *Troze* Vol. 1

No. 3 (2009) p.6 <[http://www.nmmc.co.uk/index.php?page=Research&publication=troze&troze\\_id=15](http://www.nmmc.co.uk/index.php?page=Research&publication=troze&troze_id=15)> [accessed 4 November 2009]

<sup>6</sup> Fenton, *Troze* p.19

<sup>7</sup> N. Middlemiss, 'Chelwell Steam Navigation Co. Ltd.' in *Travels of the Tramps: Twenty Tramp Fleets* Vol. III (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Shield publications, 1992) pp.98-102

<sup>8</sup> Peter Hennessey captures the spirit of the time in his title *Never Again: Britain 1945 - 1951*, (London: Vintage, 1993) neatly encapsulating his whole thesis on page 2

<sup>9</sup> CRO X 900 series

<sup>10</sup> J. Phillips, *The Great Alliance: Economic Recovery and the Problems of Power 1945 -1951*, (London: Pluto Press, 1996) p.132

<sup>11</sup> P. Turnbull and others, 'Persistent Militants and Quiescent Comrades: Intra Industry Strike Activity on the Docks 1947-1989' in *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 44 No.4 (1996), p.709

<sup>12</sup> Committee of Inquiry into the Working of the Dock Labour Scheme (Devlin Committee) Report. (London: HMSO, 1956)

<sup>13</sup> T. Hororé, 'Patrick Arthur Devlin' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/public/articles>> [accessed 30 September 2006]

<sup>14</sup> Report of the Committee of Inquiry under Lord Devlin into the Wages Structure and Level of Pay for Dock Workers. (London: HMSO, 1965)

<sup>15</sup> 'Notice of Allocation to Permanent Employment' 1 September 1967, held by Falmouth Local History and Research Project

<sup>16</sup> *Cornish Guardian*, 29 April 1965, p.15; *Lloyds' Register of Shipping* for relevant years.

<sup>17</sup> R. Fenton, 'Coast Lines 1917 - 1970: The Rise and Decline of a Coastal Shipping Empire', in *Ships Monthly* October-December 1985

<sup>18</sup> In his *Dockers: The Impact of Industrial Change* (London: Fontana Collins, 1972) p. 178, insider D.F. Wilson believes that early moves towards modernisation made in Lord Rochdale's *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Major Ports of Great Britain* (HMSO, London, 1962) saw employers asking 'too much for too little'. This may have contributed to the increase in days lost to strikes from 199,000 per year on average between 1957 and 1959 to 242,000 between 1960 and 1962 (M.P. Jackson, *Labour Relations on the Docks* (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1973) p. 73.

<sup>19</sup> Among others, differing perspectives on the Devlin Inquiry's failure fully to prepare the port transport industry for a radically different future can be seen in Wilson, *Dockers: The Impact of Industrial Change*, p. 305; J.W. Durcan & others, *Strikes in Post-war Britain*, (Hemel Hempstead: Allen & Unwin, 1983) p. 310; J. Phillips and N. Whiteside, *Casual Labour: The Unemployment Question in the Port Transport Industry*, (London: Clarendon Press, 1985) p. 267

<sup>20</sup> *Falmouth Packet*, 27 January 1989, p.1

<sup>21</sup> K.O. Morgan, *The People's Peace: British History 1945 - 1990*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) p. 437

<sup>22</sup> National Archives, BK 2/1237 - 1239

<sup>23</sup> T. Chapman, 'The National Dock Labour Scheme in Cornwall', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Exeter, Institute of Cornish Studies, 2005), p. 200

<sup>24</sup> N. Evans and others, 'The Abolition of the Dock Labour Scheme' (Department of Employment, Pleda plc and MDS Transmodal, 1993) p. 66 and p.49

<sup>25</sup> P. Turnbull and others, *Dock Strike: Conflict and Restructuring of British Ports*, (Aldershot: Avebury, 1992) p. 228