

Cochrane's Shipyard 1898 – 1993: Selby's last shipbuilders

Selby had many shipbuilding firms over the centuries. Cochrane's was the last to survive

Being on a navigable river with access to the North Sea, and with easy availability of timber both locally and by importing, it is not surprising that Selby became a centre for shipbuilding. The earliest records of shipbuilding in Selby date back to the 15th century, as it is said that one of Henry V's ships at Agincourt, the 'Catherine', was



built in the town. Written records go back over 200 years, with shipyards of varying size existing along Ousegate, and both Green's and Gutteridge's close to The Quay in the 19th century.

Connell's yard, at the corner of Shipyard Road and Ousegate, closed in the 1950s with modern housing now covering the site.

However, the most famous and final of Selby's shipbuilders was Cochrane's. Cochrane and Sons was originally founded by Andrew Cochrane in 1884 at Beverley, but then moved to Selby in 1898. Selby had the huge advantage of being on the Ouse which led directly and easily to the North Sea and also was at the hub of a good road and rail distribution network.

During World War I Cochrane's produced 70 steam trawlers for the Admiralty, along with 90 for private owners. Between the wars, construction was mainly of trawlers, tugs and coasters. During World War II Cochrane's played a huge part in the war effort building tugs, trawlers and supply boats for the Admiralty.

During the post-war period, trade remained healthy, with construction of coasters, fishing vessels and ferries gave employment to around 400 skilled workers : skilled not only in shipbuilding, but also in fitting out trades. From the mid 1960s onwards, a rapid series of changes in ownership brought decline and eventual closure.

In 1965 control of the yard passed from the Cochrane family to Ross Group Ltd, and over the next 25 years there were a series of further ownership changes. The Cochrane name was reinstated in 1977, although ownership had not returned to the family. During this time, the variety of vessels designed and built at the yard continued to expand, but the final owners of what had now become a group of linked businesses decided they no longer wished to be involved in shipbuilding and closed the yard in October 1992 with equipment auctioned off the following year. Today, two decades later some of the former buildings have taken on other uses, but the shipyard site has a derelict and uncared-for air.



As the river is relatively narrow at Selby, ships were launched sideways into the river. A launch day was always a bit of a special event as yard workers, interested townsfolk and schoolkids bunking off gathered to see the huge lump of metal slide down the stocks, hit the water with a huge splash, cant over, seem about to sink, before almost magically coming to rights in the main channel of the Ouse.

As mentioned in the 'Transport' walk, as the vessels got larger, the waves produced increased in size, and there was a danger of the water overtopping the Barlby bank. Spectators were advised not to stand amidships of the launch, but at the launch of the Helmsman in the early 1970s. This advice was ignored, water swept spectators off their feet, and a woman almost drowned when trapped under a car.

Whilst launches in wartime were quite secretive affairs, after World War II, the launch day was taken up with formal celebrations. Often a dignitary or the wife of a director of the company who had ordered the ship would do the honours with a bottle of champagne. Afterwards, there might be a tour of the works, and certainly a proper luncheon with a dining card and suitable toasting. Much of this ephemera can be seen at the archives mentioned below, and newsreel of these sideways launches can be seen at the Pathé website. On one occasion, the Duchess of Kent launched a Caledonian MacBrayne ferry, and the full royal panoply was captured by enthusiasts at the Selby Cine Society who still show the footage at events around town



The noise from the yard must have been quite something to experience, especially when the hull was hot riveted together. The construction teams worked in gangs. One would extract the rivet from the furnace when it had reached red heat, and skilfully lob it across to his mate who would catch it in gloved hand, and rapidly position it in the required hole. A mighty hammer blow pushed the rivet through to be met by a metal block which rounded off the end. This was skilled, precision, heavy engineering work. If one man from the team was off ill, productivity would decline tremendously as the gang's rhythm was lost.

Cochrane's also trained their workers well. The 1811 college referred to in the 'Buildings' walk educated shipyard apprentices in all manner of skills – and regularly turned out regional 'Apprentices of the Year' in the early 1970s.

Taking it further

Details of Cochrane's ships are at Grace's Guide www.gracesguide.co.uk

The North Yorks CC and Heritage Lottery Fund project called 'Trawling Through Time' ran during 2012. A huge online archive can be found by searching for 'Trawling Through Time' at www.northyorks.gov.uk. As, sadly, there is no appropriate repository in Selby, the physical archive is at County Hall in Northallerton.

Roland Chilvers of the Selby Museum Group has produced two books full of photographs of everything to do with Cochranes. These are available at Selby library or Selby Town Hall.

Pathé newsreel of a ship's launch is at www.britishpathe.com/video/trawler-launched-sideways/query/selby+ship+launch

Peter Coates and Eric Hammall are both former Cochrane's employees and published a greatly detailed and illustrated book in 2013, that also contained a comprehensive list of all the ships built by Cochranes. This is "Cochranes of Selby : Yorkshire Shipbuilders 1884-1992". Copies are available at Selby Library.

An hour-long DVD covering the life and times of Cochrane's and its workers was produced through the auspices of the Selby Globe Cinema. Copies are available for £10 from Selby Town Hall.