

The Port of Silloth - Past & Present

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The original access to the sea, as a means of transport for the busy merchants of the growing city of Carlisle, was via a small canal completed in 1823.

The eleven mile long canal ran from a dock basin in the city, to Fishers Cross, which was grandly re-named Port Carlisle. However, just thirty years later, it was becoming increasingly clear that access to the canal was growing ever more difficult due to siltation in the upper reaches of the Solway Firth. Larger vessels of that time which berthed at Port Carlisle were being forced to sit on the mud at low water and the canal was no longer large enough to accept economically sized vessels for transit to the city. The canal was finally closed in 1853 and the route converted to a railway, to continue to serve the diminishing traffic calling at Port Carlisle.

In 1855 an Act of Parliament (The Silloth Dock Act), allowed a 13 mile branch railway line to be constructed, which would spur off the Port Carlisle line at Drumburgh and eventually reach the coast further south and west near a sparsely populated farming hamlet called Silloth. It was known from Admiralty surveys that there was relatively deep water close offshore in this area. The Act also permitted the construction of a pier and dock, within which ships could be kept afloat at low water by a pair of gates to retain water within the dock.

Construction work began in August 1855 and the railway reached the coast twelve months



Following the Pier into Silloth Dock

later. By the middle of 1857, the timber pile pier was usable by shipping and work then commenced on the construction of the dock. The dock was completed and officially opened on 3rd August 1859, when it was formally named "Marshall Dock", after the local Member of Parliament who was one of the main supporters of this venture and a major shareholder in "The Carlisle & Silloth Bay Dock and Railway Company".

In addition to opportunistic trading, regular shipping services were established from Silloth to Liverpool, the Isle of Man, Dublin and Belfast. There were also freight and passenger services across the Solway Firth to Annan, Dumfries and Carsethorn. Trade at that time consisted of imports of raw cotton for the Carlisle spinning and weaving industry, phosphate fertilisers, timber, slate, livestock and manufactured items. Exports included coal, agricultural produce and a wide variety of manufactured cotton goods. Business grew steadily over the next few years, with ownership of the dock and railway transferring to "The North British Railway Company".

That was until disaster struck the dock during a

storm on 6th April 1879. Possibly undermined by a series of winter storms, the dock entrance and gates collapsed, trapping about twenty vessels inside at that time. Temporary repairs were soon completed allowing a resumption of shipping but the dock remained tidal. It was decided to build a new dock behind the existing Marshall Dock, which would therefore be afforded more shelter from the seas. The "New Dock" was completed and opened in June 1885.

Two year later, in 1887, Carrs opened their new flour mill alongside the dock, resulting in large volumes of wheat being imported, much of it arriving in great sailing ships from Australia. Other trades continued to flourish, especially coal exports to Ireland and cattle imports from Ireland. Shipping trade continued throughout both World Wars, where Silloth was considered to be a 'safe port', despite occasional U-boat activity in the Irish Sea.



SS Yarrow entering Silloth Docks

From the early 1920's, the condition of the 1000 foot long pier that extended into the Solway from the south side of Marshall Dock entrance started to deteriorate, with a noticeable subsidence at the outer end. Over the following years, sections of the pier gradually collapsed into the sea. The last remaining 100 foot stump was finally demolished in 1973. It was then replaced by a short groyne and rubble breakwater, built to try and prevent the dock entrance from being silted up by the northward drift of beach material.

After the Second World War, ownership of the port and the associated railway connections changed from the Scottish Regional Railways to the LNER and then to London Midland Railways. In 1950, the railways were nationalised and management of most of the railway ports, including Silloth, was transferred to the Docks



Discharging cattle in the 1980's



& Inland Waterways Executive, as part of the British Transport Commission. Trade in those days consisted of imports of grain, cattle, potash, phosphates and perlite, with occasional shipments of sugar, slag, and steel billets (ingot moulds). Exports consisted of coal, fertilisers and bran.

Immediately post-war, large quantities of munitions were taken by sea from Silloth, for dumping in the Beaufort Dyke, a deep trench within the North Channel between Ireland and Galloway. In 1963, the British Transport Commission was dissolved and management of Silloth Docks, along with several other railway ports, was passed on to the British Transport Docks Board.

Thanks to Transport Minister Dr Beeching's heavy axe, 1964 saw the unfortunate closure of the railway to Silloth. In 1983, the BTDB was privatised by the Conservative

government and became Associated British Ports, encompassing new and demanding duties to shareholders and the stock market.

The Port of Silloth remains busy and profitable today, handling ships of a size up to the physical limitations of the dock infrastructure. Trade includes a wide variety of agribulks from Russia, the Baltic States and Tunisia. Wheat is imported from Germany, France and North America, liquid molasses is transhipped from Europe and wood-pulp for the cellophane industry arrives from Spain. 2007 saw a record cargo deadweight of 3,901 tonnes arrive in one shipment.

A small local shrimping fleet operates from the outer dock. The port is still operated today by ABP, although now a privately owned consortium, with 21 ports located around Great Britain, handling more than a quarter of all the UK's sea-borne trade.



"Tammerack" and "Gretchen Weston" discharging goods 31st January 1972