

WALKING ON WATER STREET

Graham Jones explores the histories of various buildings in the Water Street area.

Part 3 – BOROUGH BUILDINGS, WATER ST (1859 – ca. 1970)¹

In its early years Borough Buildings lived gracefully between two buildings which captured greater attention: Oriel Chambers (1864) at 14 Water Street, for which Peter Ellis was so rudely criticised when the building was originally constructed, and Middleton Buildings (ca. 1859) at 8 Water Street which, until 1916, was the home of the Cunard Line.

The comment in Charles Reilly's 1921 tour of Water Street,² – “After the empty site, where the old Cunard Building was, comes the oddest building in Liverpool – Oriel Chambers,...” gives the impression that Borough Buildings did not exist. But it did, and during the century of its existence it provided office accommodation for The Liverpool Steam Ship Owners' Association, the American Chamber of Commerce and a variety of important businesses and shipping lines.

Trade between America and the U.K.'s premier port had become so important by the end of the 18th century that an American Chamber of Commerce was formed in 1801. The first three attempts at laying a transatlantic cable between 1857 and 1865 had ended in failure when the cables broke or developed faults, but success was finally achieved in 1866, with the Great Eastern being one of the ships involved in cable laying. On September 20th of that year, following a letter from the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce regarding their proposal for a public dinner to celebrate the laying of the cable, the American Chamber met at Borough Buildings (to which they had moved their offices in 1864 from Exchange Street West). They resolved not to be associated with the proposal from the Liverpool Chamber but instead to appoint a committee to consider what the American Chamber should do by way of celebration. The committee subsequently met at the offices of Guion & Co. in Rumford Street (the Guion Line was a Cunard Line competitor) and the outcome was the presentation in March 1867 of four solid gold medals – and an excuse for a further banquet.³ The American Civil War having come to an end, the impact upon the cotton trade of the cable's means of rapid communication was dramatic: deals could be secured within a matter of hours instead of the weeks that had been involved with letters carried on the Atlantic mail ships. The American Chamber of Commerce maintained a presence in Liverpool until the beginning of the 20th century and saw out its days at Borough Buildings.

Pilkington, Wilson and Chambers, the original managers of the White Star Line, and T. H. Ismay were each initially based at Drury Buildings in Water Street. Ismay moved to Borough Buildings in 1864 as a ship broker and purchased the White Star Line in 1867. By 1871 the company's entry in the directory had become 'Ismay, Imrie and Co., shipowners, Oceanic Steam Navigation Co.', and the 1880s photo at the Covent



Garden corner of Borough Buildings shows the name 'Ismay, Imrie & Co., Passenger Office' above the basement doorway. The first telephone exchange was established in Exchange Buildings in 1879 and the White Star Line, with telephone number 24, was one of the original subscribers.⁴ The company remained at Borough Buildings until completion of its Albion House premises at James Street in 1898.

White Star Line of Royal & U. S. Mail Steamers
TELEPHONE No. 24
 sailing between Liverpool and New York
 10 Water street, and 2 Covent garden, W.
 (Ismay, Imrie and Co.)
 works, Strand road Bootle, W
TELEPHONE No. 2620



Above left. From the numerical section of Gore's directory for 1892. Above right. A surviving chart and document box. (Private collection).

The Liverpool Steam Ship Owners' Association was established in 1858 to lobby the newly formed Mersey Docks and Harbour Board, and the Association secured members onto the Board following its first meeting. Membership of the Association "was drawn from the leading liner companies and its history is very much the history of the deep-sea liner trade. It became an influential body in national as well as local affairs to the extent that it was often consulted by Parliamentary Committees on the shipping industry. The membership from its very beginning represented a 'Who's Who' of the great names of both the Liverpool and national shipping scene".⁵

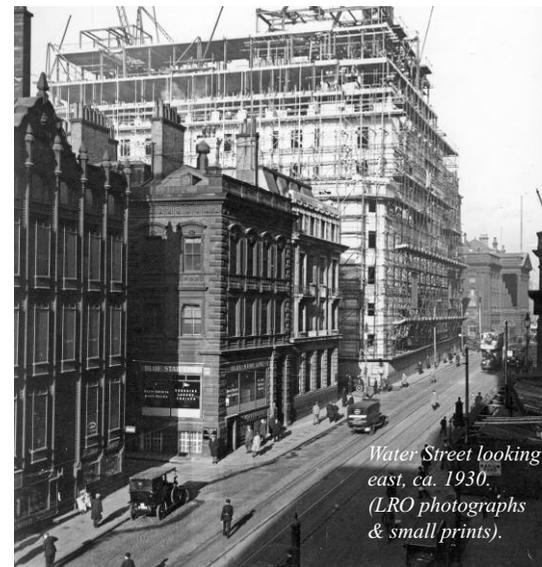
James Bibby (son of the founder of the original Bibby Line) was the Association's founder-chairman in 1858. Their 'Founding Resolution', reproduced in the Association's centenary book,⁶ was moved by William Inman (whose Liverpool, New York and Philadelphia Steam Ship Co. became better known as the Inman Line). Charles MacIver (whose firm managed the 3,300 ton paddle steamer 'Persia', the largest steamship then sailing from the port), followed on as chairman in 1859. A close relationship must have existed with the American Chamber of Commerce throughout at least the 1870s since the directories of the period show that the two organisations, together with the North Atlantic Steam Traffic Conference, shared the same secretary, John Edward Gray Hill (a Conference being a group of shipping company representatives who met in order to resolve issues around competition). Writing a century later,⁷ George Chandler noted that, compared to 70,000 tons of shipping entered by the six founder members in 1858, the Association had 67 members in 1958 who registered 4,600,000 tons, mostly consisting of liners that were "the aristocrats of the merchant navy." The Association maintained its office at Borough Buildings for over a century until the building's demise around 1970.

A business which also had offices at Borough Buildings until the end of the building's life took up residence there in 1862 as Duncan, Squarey & Blackmore, attorneys. In 1865 John Edward Gray Hill (mentioned above) joined the firm, and over the years

the name changed to Duncan, Hill & Parkinson (1870s), developed into Hill, Dickinson & Lightbound (1880s), and passed via the nicely symmetrical Hill, Dickinson, Dickinson & Hill (1890s), before finally settling down to Hill, Dickinson & Co. in the early 20th century. The firm, which represented White Star following the sinking of the Titanic and Cunard after the sinking of the Lusitania, is still in existence today.

Although Borough Buildings was listed as no. 10 Water Street, occupants of its basement were occasionally shown as being at no. 12 (with the directories sometimes locating it incorrectly on the opposite corner of Covent Garden). Over the years the basement saw a wide variety of occupants, the first being shown in Gore's directory for 1859 as The Electric & International Telegraph, one of several rival companies that sprang into existence as attempts were being made to lay the transatlantic cable. At the beginning of the 20th century no. 12 was occupied briefly by the letterpress and lithographic printers, Webb, Evans & Co, and then, during the latter years of Cunard's increasingly cramped accommodation at Middleton Buildings, the company made use of no. 12 for its 3rd class passenger department. Throughout the 1920s the basement had become the premises for Scriven Bros. and Co., leather, hide and general merchants, whilst from the 1930s and into the 1950s it was home to Robert Bunting at the Rembrandt Gallery. No. 12 saw out its last few years as the passenger department for Gracie, Beazley and Co whose main offices had remained at Oriol Chambers.

By 1930 Borough Buildings had become home to the office of the Blue Star Line, and the 1930 photograph below shows the building and its neighbour at no. 8 (now Barclays Bank, the replacement for Middleton Buildings). Both are dwarfed by a partially constructed Martins Bank Building, and in the selective enlargement the Line can be seen advertising Sunshine Luxury Cruises, whilst passers-by glance at the basement window of Scriven Bros. & Co.



Water Street looking east, ca. 1930. (LRO photographs & small prints).





The Blue Star Line was registered in 1911. Founded by the Vestey Brothers, a firm of Liverpool butchers and one of the first to introduce refrigeration into their shops, the Line was formed to import refrigerated meat from Vestey's processing works in Buenos Aires, and to carry eggs and other perishables from China. The Line provided a valuable service in WWI carrying beef to supply the allied armies in France. In time they also developed a thriving trade with Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, together with cruise liners.

A 1935 advertisement for one of the Line's luxury cruises. An attractive full-colour poster reprint is available from the Merseyside Maritime Museum.

Built in 1927 by Cammell Laird's, the Arandora Star was one of Blue Star's 'Luxury Five' liners that also operated a South American service from London. With her colour scheme of a white hull and scarlet ribbon she was soon nicknamed the 'Wedding Cake' or the 'Chocolate Box.' Requisitioned by the Government during WWII, she left Liverpool for Canada on July 2nd 1940 carrying Italian and German internees, German prisoners-of-war, and British troops. Having fled Nazi persecution to seek refuge in Britain in the 1930s, at the outbreak of war the internees found themselves faced with the Huyton Alien Internment Camp, and then deportation. In a cruel twist of fate, the following day, July 3rd 1940, the ship was torpedoed by U-47 off County Donegal with the loss of 805 lives. And so the pavement on Water Street between Covent Garden and Rumford Street which had been filled by anxious relatives waiting outside Middleton Buildings following the torpedoing of the Lusitania in 1915 was, almost precisely a quarter of a century later, once again a place of sorrow. Overseas deportation was terminated.

The Blue Star Line later acquired two famous Liverpool Lines: the Lamport & Holt Line in 1944 and the Booth Line in 1946. Although their main office was in London, with the Liverpool branch office at Borough Buildings, members of the Company were still having reunions in Liverpool into the present century.

Allan Tankard was commissioned to produce post-war views of Liverpool and his 1947 watercolour was reproduced in Pictures from the Post for that year.⁸ The scene remained little changed for a further two decades, although the ruins of Colonial House, a victim of WWII bombing and just discernable on the left of the painting, was eventually replaced by Reliance House. However the move by Barclays Bank from no. 8 Water Street (right foreground of the painting) into Martins Bank Building in 1969 appears to have precipitated the complete redevelopment of the Water Street frontage between Covent Garden and Rumford Street.



Above left: Water Street 1947. Watercolour by Allan P. Tankard. Above right: The Covent Garden junction of Water Street, 1975. By that time nos. 8-12 Water Street had been bulldozed and the photograph shows the sun shining on the hoarding which surrounds their nearly-complete replacement. LRO photographs & small prints.



Left: Norwich House, 8 Water Street, in 2011. Above: The detail shows the Covent Garden basement entrance on the left, equivalent to the old basement no. 12, with the main entrance 'E18HT' approximately at the party line of the original nos. 10 and 8.

The new no. 8, cutely named 'E18HT', still exists today and offers a marked contrast to its neighbour, Oriol Chambers. Sadly, it is one of many buildings in the Water Street of the 21st century that has empty offices.

Sources and notes

¹ A modified version of this article will form part of a growing series entitled 'Walking on Water Street' which will be made available in pdf form to the Liverpool Record Office (LRO) when it reopens in 2013.

² Reilly, C. H., *Some Liverpool Streets and Buildings in 1921*, Daily Post & Mercury (LRO classification 720 REI).

³ A comprehensive account of the laying of the cables together with paintings of the *Great Eastern* at work, minutes of the meeting of the American Chamber of Commerce at Borough Buildings, an *Illustrated London News* account of the recipients of the medal, and details of the medal itself can be found in Blanton, H., *The Atlantic Cable Medal of 1866*, edition revised to 2006. A pdf version exists at <http://atlantic-cable.com/Souvenirs/1866Medal/AtlanticCableMedal1866New.pdf>.

⁴ Roberts, S., *The First Hundred Years of the Telephone Service in the Liverpool Telephone Area*, S. Roberts & B.T., 1981 (LRO classification 384.6 ROB).

⁵ www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/maritime/archive, information sheet 51.

⁶ Powell, L. H., *A Hundred Years On. History of the Liverpool Steam Ship Owners' Association, 1858-1958* (LRO classification 387.506 STE).

⁷ Chandler, G., *Liverpool Shipping. A Short History*, Phoenix House, 1960 (LRO classification 387.2 CHA).

⁸ Tankard, A. P., Water Street, in *Pictures from the Post*, 1947 (LRO classification 942.7214 LIV). The original tinted version is in the Binns Collection (LRO classification Binns Coll D434), and is also reproduced in Parrott, K., *A Portrait of Liverpool*, Bluecoat Press, 2006 (LRO classification 759.2753 TAN).