

# Fifies On The Firth

by Neale Elder

## Hark! What is that sound I hear? - It's the 'Fifie' duntin aff the pier!

The origins of this little couplet are unknown; but it has been recited many times in my family. No account of Dundee's waterfront could be considered complete without a reference to the Tay ferries: the 'Fifies' to Dundonians, although Fifers appear to have bestowed no equivalent sobriquet!

Like another great estuarial seaport, Liverpool, Dundee enjoyed a cross-river ferry service delivering travellers right into the heart of the city. The fondness of Liverpoolians and Wirral dwellers for the Mersey ferries has ensured the survival in service of the last three to be built: *Mountwood*, *Overchurch* and *Woodchurch*, albeit now renamed.

Sadly, Dundee cannot say the same for the last three Tay ferries - the *Scotsraig*, *Abercraig* and *B L Nairn* - so well recalled by those of a certain age, and which were withdrawn from the passage in 1966 with the opening of the Tay Road Bridge.

The Tay ferries had been owned by the Dundee Harbour Trustees since 1873, prior to which the service was in the hands of the Caledonian Railway and its predecessor, the Scottish Central. In fact, competition from the railway threatened the existence of the

ferry service until the growth of road traffic after World War I secured its survival. Paradoxically, this growth also created early calls for construction of a road bridge, which eventually was to spell the end for the 'Fifies'.

Over a span of 130 years from the arrival of the first steamer - the *PS Union* - in 1821, thirteen vessels were placed on passage between Dundee and Newport. Six of these were built in Dundee, three in Perth, one at Broughty Ferry and three on or about the Clyde. This last group included the first of two motor vessels, the *Abercraig*, which was launched in 1939 on the White Cart Water at the Paisley shipyard of Fleming and Ferguson.

*MV Abercraig* was equipped with the revolutionary German Voith-Schneider propulsion system, aiding manoeuvrability in comparison to the old paddle steamers. Unfortunately, she was placed in service immediately after the outbreak of World War II, which effectively cut off access to the manufacturer's technical support and spares. The propellers were to prove unreliable

during the war years, resulting in much 'down time' for *Abercraig*, while the venerable paddle steamers *Sir William High* and *B L Nairn* (dating back to 1924 and 1929 respectively) kept the service running.

Not that the paddle steamers were strangers to misfortune: in December 1948 *Sir William High*, which was yet to be fitted with radar, became lost in dense fog as she crossed from Newport on an evening sailing. The ferry approached the Dundee shore half a mile downstream of the landing place at Craig Pier and ran aground on the Fowler Rock. The Broughty Ferry lifeboat *Mona* was sent to the aid of seventy passengers, who were safely conveyed to the Camperdown sea lock (somewhat adrift of their intended destination!), but the vehicles on board had to wait until the ferry was refloated on the high tide in the early hours.



RNLB *Mona* (ON 775) 1935-1959) Photo: Courtesy of RNLI

PS *B L Nairn* (in service 1929-1966) ▼



