

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 Liverpudlians 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Tay ferries - the *Scotsraig*, *Abercraig* and *B L Nairn* - so well recalled by those of a certain age, and which were withdrawn from the passage in 1966 with the opening of the Tay Road Bridge.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

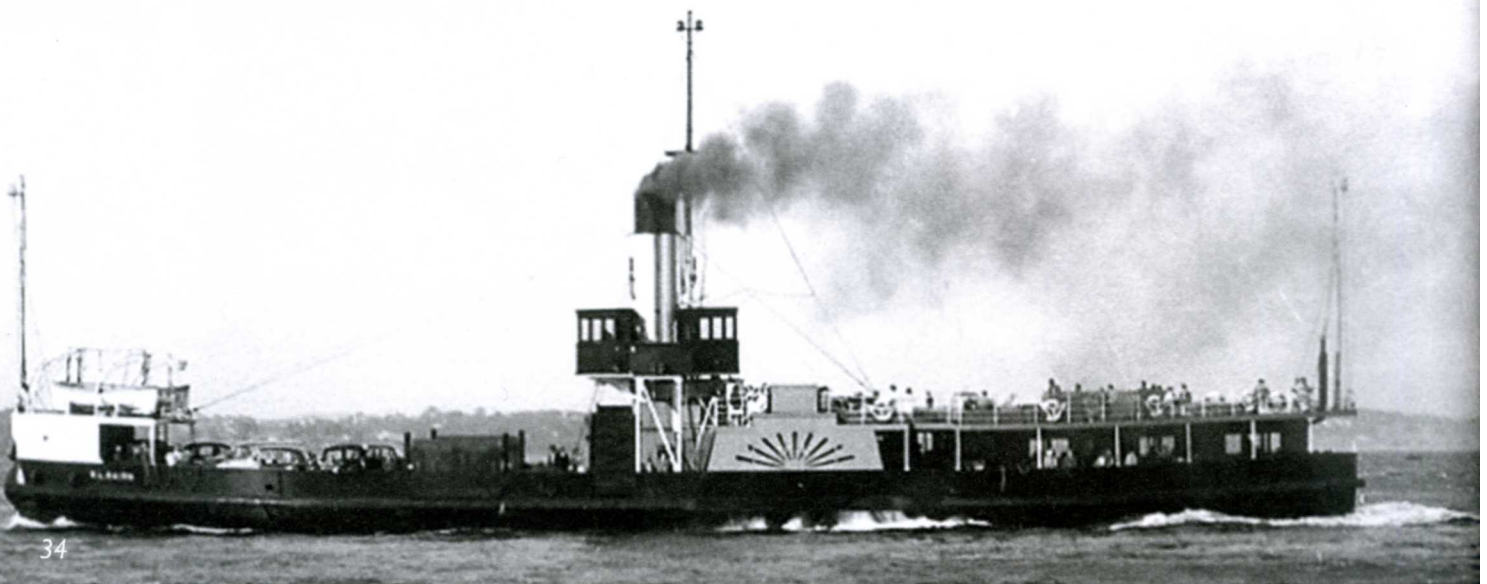
during the war years, resulting in much 'down time' for *Abercraig*, while the venerable paddle steamers *Sir William High* and *B L Nairn* (dating back to 1924 and 1929 respectively) kept the service running.

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) ▼





▲ Tay Road Bridge under construction and MV Scotsraig. Photo: Bob Kennedy

Sir William High was replaced, in 1951, by the Caledon-built MV *Scotsraig*. The last Tay ferry to be launched, she was of similar design to the *Abercraig*. Despite the wartime teething troubles with the Voith-Schneider propulsion, it was adopted again by the Trustees for the new vessel.

The scene was now set for the next fifteen years. The two 'Craigs' provided the regular service between Dundee and Newport-on-Tay; while *B L Nairn* was retained as the relief vessel, normally berthed in Earl Grey Dock.

Immediately before construction of the Tay Road Bridge, the ferries were operating to a well established timetable. Both regular vessels were usually berthed overnight at Craig Pier, with a half-hourly weekday

service frequency starting at 7am. In winter one of the boats was put to bed on its arrival from Newport on the 7pm sailing, leaving an hourly frequency for the rest of the evening; but in summer the half-hourly sailings were maintained up until the close of service. The last departure from Dundee to Newport was at 10pm, returning at 10.30.

While those who missed the last sailing might still have been able to catch a train to Newport as late as 11.20pm, the story is told of late-night revellers on occasions making their way back to Fife on foot across the rail bridge!

From the start of its construction in 1963, the Tay Road Bridge began to make its presence felt. At low water, the ferries had

to make a lengthy detour downriver to avoid the Middle Bank. As the temporary bridge advanced from the Dundee shore it progressively blocked the northern channel, the navigation spans being at the Fife end. For the last three years of operation, the ferry sailings were severely curtailed for some hours either side of low tide.

On 8 July 1964, in a freak summer gale, MV *Abercraig* lost power and was driven downstream to collide with the service gangway associated with construction of the road bridge, about 250 yards out from the Dundee side. In atrocious conditions, planks were laid by workmen to convey some thirty passengers - each equipped with a yellow life-jacket - on to the temporary bridge and safely to shore. It

was undoubtedly a memorable experience, although the Courier reported that one elderly lady thought she had arrived normally at Craig Pier and the whole episode was just part of the usual disembarkation routine!



◀ MV *Scotsraig*
December 1956

Photo: George Bett

145 years of powered ferry operation on the Firth of Tay came to an end, rather curiously and abruptly in midweek, on Thursday 18 August 1966. On this day HM Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother formally opened the Tay Road Bridge. *Abercraig* and *Scotsraig* kept the scheduled ferry service going up until 6 pm, when the latter made three 'farewell' crossings of the Tay - Newport to Dundee and then a last return trip.

10,000 road vehicles flooded across the new bridge in the first six hours while the ferries, still bedecked with bunting after their final sailings, were laid up and later joined *B L Nairn* in Victoria Dock to await disposal.

It was some time before all three vessels were sold. First to go was the *B L Nairn*, in September 1967. Although there had been talk of preserving her, sadly the 38 year old paddle steamer was taken away to Blyth in Northumberland to be broken up. *Abercraig* and *Scotsraig* were sold for £15,000 to Pounds Shipowners and Shipbreakers Ltd in Portsmouth. They left the Tay for good in January 1968. By the seventies they had found their way to a new life as general purpose vessels in Malta.

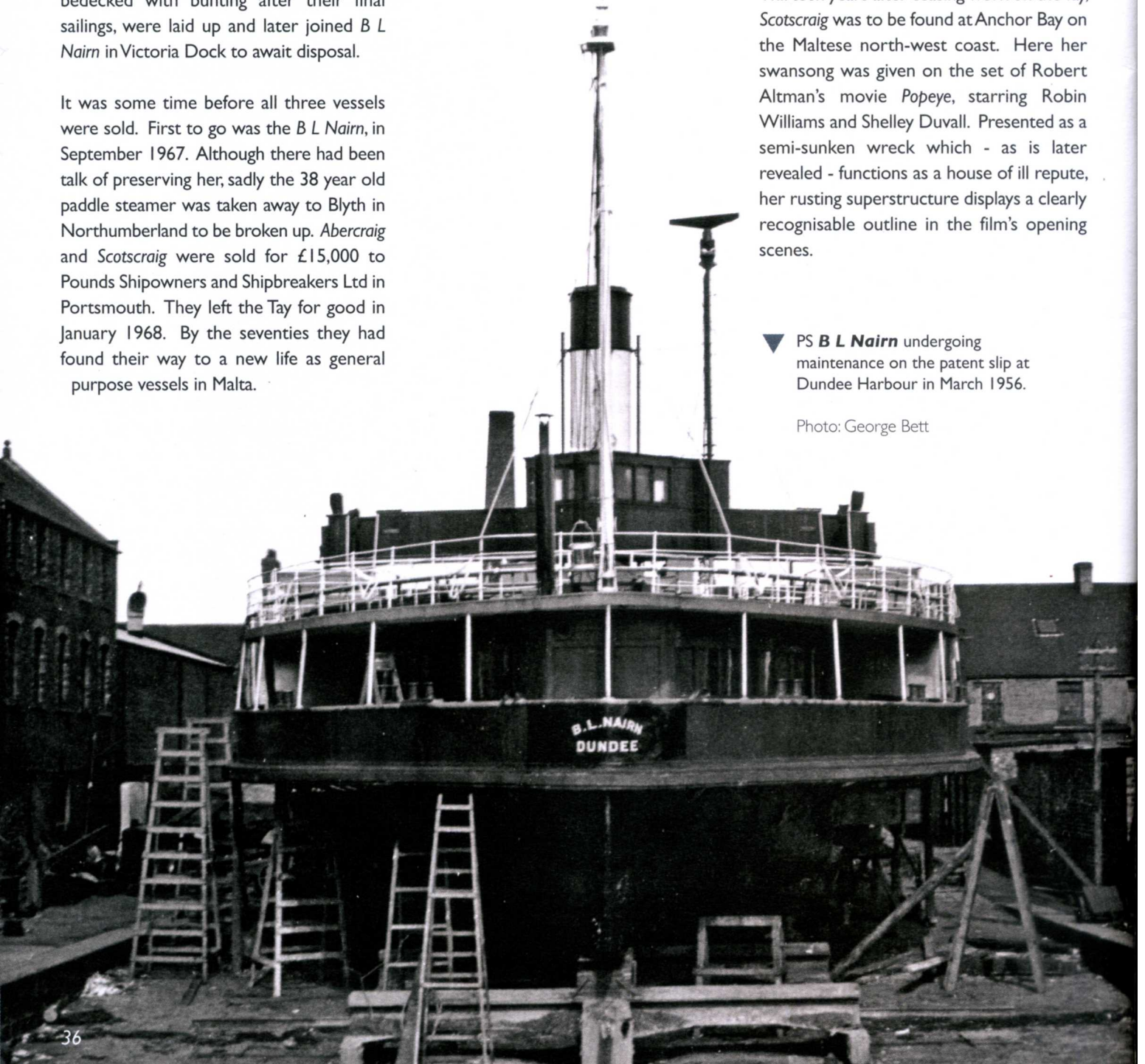
▼ Tay Ferries Schedule Dundee Directory 1960

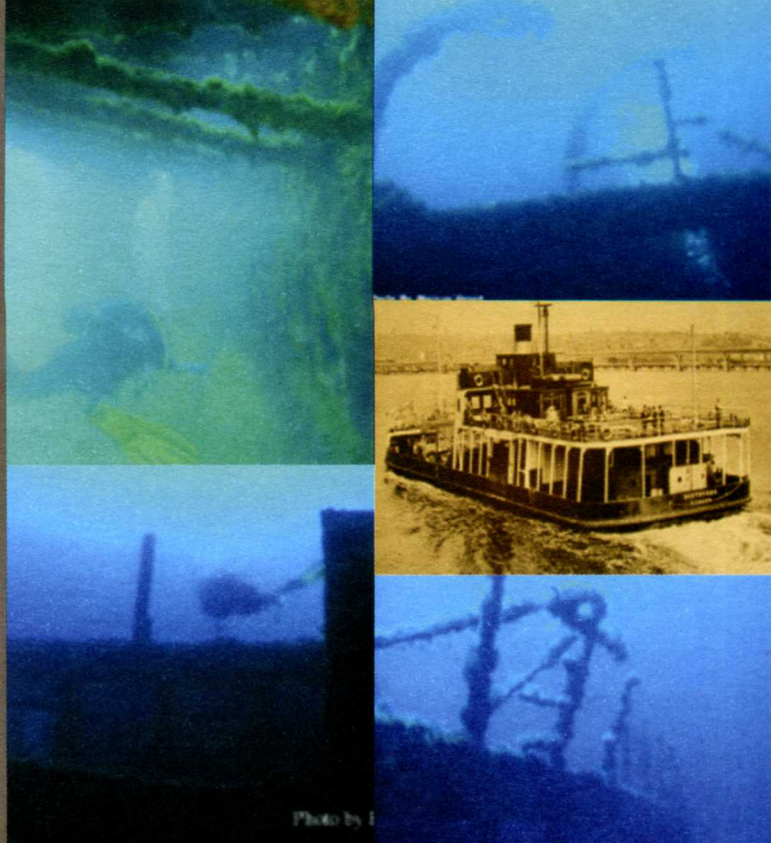
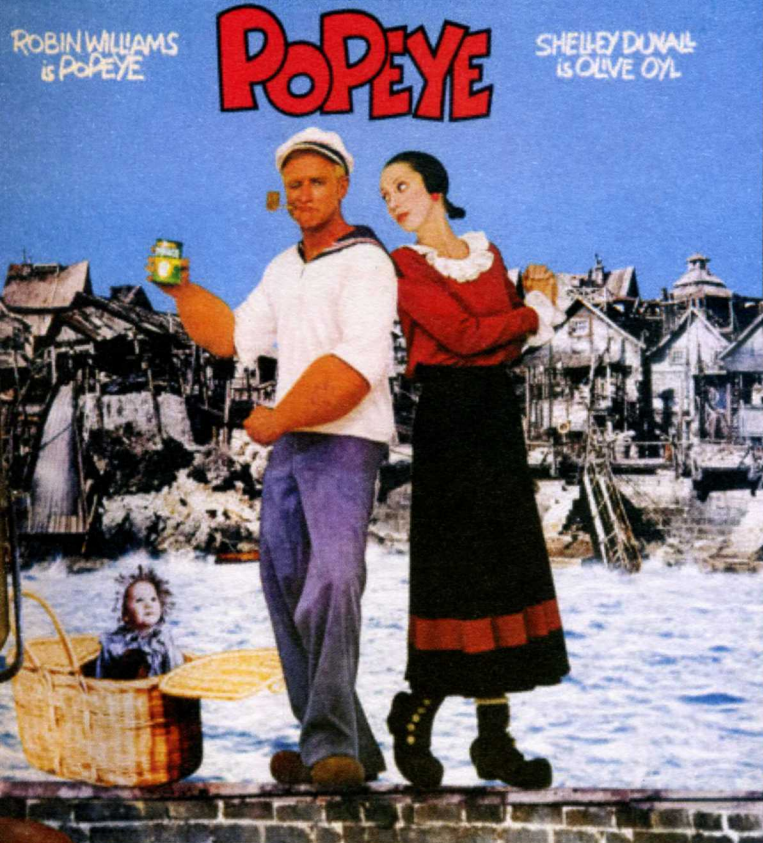
TAY FERRIES, Craig pier, South Union street—Capt. Woodhead, Supt.
 Summer sailings (from 1st May to 30th September).—Dundee to Newport, 7 a.m., thereafter half-hourly until 10 p.m. Newport to Dundee, 7.30 a.m., thereafter half-hourly until 10.30 p.m. Sundays.—Dundee to Newport, 10 a.m., thereafter hourly until 8 p.m., then 9.15 p.m. Newport to Dundee, 10.30 a.m., thereafter hourly until 8.30 p.m., then 9.45 p.m.
 Winter sailings (from 1st October to 30th April).—Dundee to Newport, 7 a.m., thereafter half hourly until 7 p.m., then 8 p.m., 9 p.m., 10 p.m. Newport to Dundee, 7.30 a.m., thereafter half-hourly until 7.30 p.m., then 8.30, 9.30, and 10.30 p.m. Sundays.—Dundee to Newport, 10 a.m., thereafter hourly until 7 p.m., then 8.15 p.m. Newport to Dundee, 10.30 a.m., thereafter hourly until 7.30 p.m., then 8.45 p.m.

Thirteen years after ceasing work on the Tay, *Scotsraig* was to be found at Anchor Bay on the Maltese north-west coast. Here her swansong was given on the set of Robert Altman's movie *Popeye*, starring Robin Williams and Shelley Duvall. Presented as a semi-sunken wreck which - as is later revealed - functions as a house of ill repute, her rusting superstructure displays a clearly recognisable outline in the film's opening scenes.

▼ PS *B L Nairn* undergoing maintenance on the patent slip at Dundee Harbour in March 1956.

Photo: George Bett





▲ Popeye (1980) Advertising material

▲ An amalgam of imagery from a current internet advert for Diving in Malta.

After filming was completed in mid-1980, she was stripped of her superstructure. Her hull was refloated to be towed out to sea where, some two kilometres offshore, it dropped to the bed of the Mediterranean. Accounts seem to vary as to whether this sinking was accidental or deliberate. Either way, the hull of MV *Scotsraig* is today known to rest upright on the sea bed at a depth of some 21 metres, where it has become a popular dive site and haven for marine wildlife.

Meanwhile, the *Abercraig* languished at her moorings on the other side of the island at Marsa harbour, attracting the attention of Dundonians on holiday. The ferry had been altered in appearance to provide greater deck space for the conveyance of freight, but was still recognisable. With her hull flooded and listing to starboard, she eventually presented a sorry sight. A campaign to save and return the vessel to Dundee was initiated in 1994, but it was too late.

Abercraig was broken up in situ the following year.

Twenty years have now passed since the last 'Fifie' was lost; and August 2016 will mark the fiftieth anniversary of their withdrawal from the Tay crossing. Inevitably, the memories will flicker and die with the eventual passing of the mid-20th century generation which still recalls them so fondly.

Postscript Bibliography

I have a particular interest in the old turntable ferries of the Western Highlands, of which only one survives in service - the MV *Glenachulish*, which operates summer sailings over Kyle Rhea between Glenelg and Skye.

In early 2012, this little vessel was used to provide an emergency service at Stromeferry on Loch Carron, a rock fall having blocked the bypass road. The sight of a turntable car ferry operating on the crossing - 42 years after the old service was withdrawn - was a most remarkable one, almost dreamlike!

Might we, one day, see ferries again shuttling across the Tay between Dundee and Newport?

...Never say 'never'!

Bruce, William Scott (1980), *The Railways of Fife*, Melven Press, Perth.

Jeffrey, Andrew (1996), *Standing into Danger*, Royal National Lifeboat Institution, Dundee.

Sinclair, David (1996), *A History of the Tay Ferries*, David Bradley Management, Perth.

Weir, Marie (1988), *Ferries in Scotland*, John Donald Publishers Ltd, Edinburgh.