Shipbuilding in North Devon in the 1920s

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The 1920s was to prove to be a significant decade in the history of shipbuilding in North Devon. It saw a final act of shipbuilding at Barnstaple and Bideford, which were to cease construction of larger vessels and only build smaller craft such as launches. At the end of the decade, Appledore was the only place with the capacity to build larger vessels, and even here, the 1925–29 period saw only two barges and five launches and yachts produced. North Devon's yards never converted to boatyards and yacht building, unlike those at many centres around the Solent or in East Anglia.

The whole decade was a difficult one for the shipbuilding industry nationally; there was a short-lived boom as new vessels were built to replace some of those lost to enemy action in the First World War, but then the economy stagnated and demand for ships and shipping fell. North Devon was perhaps fortunate that its shipbuilding industry survived at all. Ship repair was a principal factor in this, as was the survival of what was essentially a nineteenth-century tradition of wooden sailing vessels locally owned and operated, which required repair by shipwrights skilled in working with wood, and modernisation in the fitting of auxiliary motors.

In this essay, the overall pattern of building will be discussed, followed by some comments about each of the building sites and their ownership. To conclude, some detail will be given about the vessels constructed and their later careers. Throughout, I shall refer to 'vessels' rather than 'ships', which is the technical term of a sailing vessel with three masts, each setting square sails (i.e. sails at right angles to the hull). North Devon did build a few ships in the nineteenth century, principally at Bideford. The *Sarah Neumann* launched at Bideford in 1859, at 1,004 tonnes was the largest of them and the largest vessel of any kind ever built in North Devon (although in gross tonnage terms, several of the vessels built at both Barnstaple and Bideford in the early 1920s came close). I have also used the term 'launch' to refer to smaller craft, typically of 20–40 tonnes and used for a variety of purposes. For purposes of analysis, I have combined these with the handful of yachts constructed. The term 'barge' is rather more self-evident, although all the barges produced in North Devon at this time were powered, with most being employed within the Taw-Torridge estuary to dig gravel and carry it principally to Barnstaple and Bideford for use in construction.

Output 1920–29

In Devon, most of the output of the shipyards occurred between 1920 and 1924, with North Devon yards contributing roughly 71% of the tonnage.[1] For 1920–29, North Devon built

[1] David J. Starkey, 'Devon's Shipbuilding Industry, 1786–1970', Chapter 7 in Michael Duffy, Stephen Fisher, Basil Greenhill, David J. Starkey and Joyce Youings (eds.), *The New Maritime History of Devon, Volume 2: From the Late Eighteenth Century to the Present Day* (Conway Maritime Press and Exeter University, 1994), pp. 78–90.

roughly 51% of the vessels by tonnage in Devon. Most of the data on construction in North Devon has come from Graham Farr's monograph[2] and is supplemented by data obtained from the Shipping and Shipbuilding website.[3]

Figure 1 shows the total shipbuilding output, 1920–29. It is evident that the period after 1924 saw very little construction, and no vessels were built in 1927 and 1928. It is also clear that Barnstaple and Bideford constructed the bulk of the tonnage in North Devon in the 1920s. The total 1920–29 output was 9,795 tonnes (gross), which was greater than that of the entire period from 1900 to 1919 (6,150 tonnes). The output of 4,496 tonnes in 1921 surpassed that of any year during the nineteenth century. However, this is a gross tonnage figure and so includes engines and bunkers, but nineteenth century output figures are for sailing vessels and are net tonnage (which, of course, is the same as gross tonnage in the absence of engines). So, net tonnage for 1921 is only 2,043 tonnes, a figure matched and surpassed many times in the nineteenth century, although roughly comparable with the average annual output in the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century (1,725 tonnes).

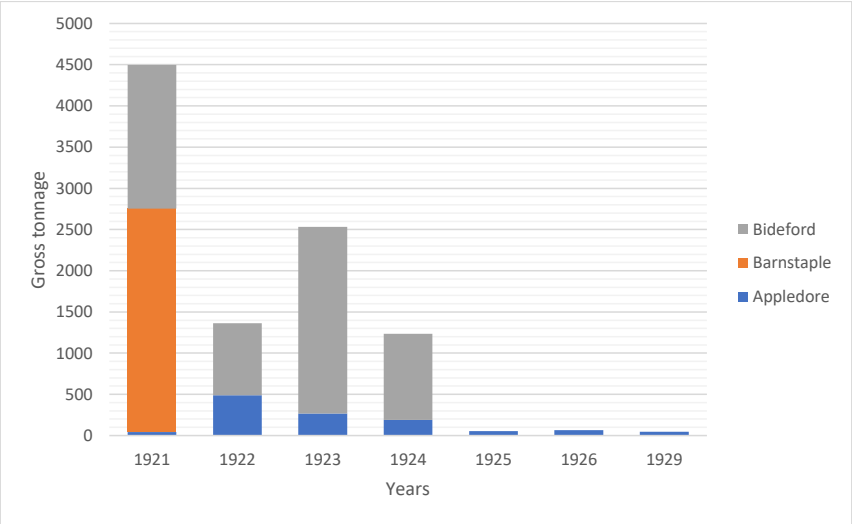

Figure 1: Annual output by place of construction, 1920–29

Figure 2 shows the total gross tonnage output of the three centres by type of vessel constructed. As noted above, the barges were all powered vessels and 'launches' include a variety of small craft, such as pilot cutters, ferry boats and cruising boats. It shows that at Appledore, barges and launches comprised more than half the tonnage, but that Barnstaple and Bideford only built steamships and thus dominate the total tonnage built in North Devon in the 1920s.

[2] Graham Farr, 'Shipbuilding in North Devon', *National Maritime Museum Maritime Monographs and Reports*, no. 22 (1976).
[3] Shipping and Shipbuilding Database <www.shippingandshipbuilding.uk> [accessed January 2023].

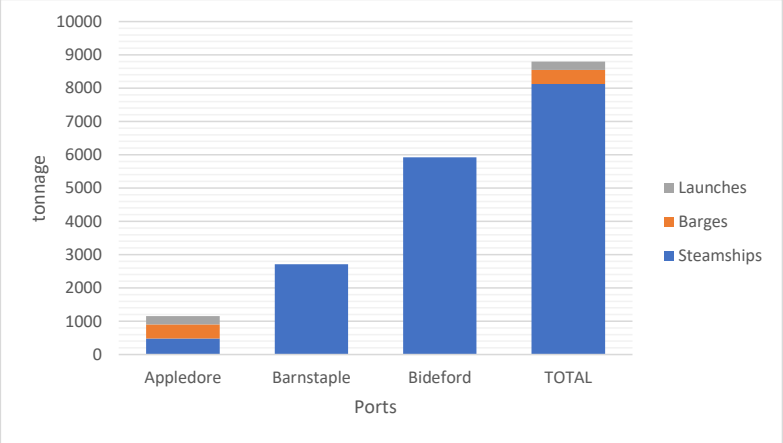

Figure 2: Total output in the 1920s by type and place of construction

Table 1 is a summary showing the actual numbers of vessels built. It shows that Appledore built more of these than Barnstaple and Bideford combined, although, as already established, these were almost entirely the smaller barges and launches.

Table 1: Numbers of each type of vessel built in the 1920s

Year	Appledore			Barnstaple			Bideford			North Devon		
	S	B	L	S	B	L	S	B	L	S	B	L
1921			3	5			2			7		3
1922	1	1					1			2	1	
1923		4	3				4			4	4	3
1924		3	1				2			2	3	1
1925		1	2								1	2
1926		1	2								1	2
1929			1									1
TOTAL	1	10	12	5			9			15	10	12

Key: *S = Ship, B = Barge, L = Launch*

Shipyards and Shipbuilders

Table 2 summarises the sites, yards and builders at work in North Devon in the 1920s. As already noted, the yards in Barnstaple and Bideford did not survive the 1920s, but all the sites and yards in Appledore remained active after the Second World War, although the boatbuilding operations from the Irsha Street area of West Appledore no longer continued. The majority of what follows draws on the work of Graham Farr.[4]

[4] Graham Farr, *op cit.,* especially pp. 8–9, 13, 15–18, 36.

Table 2: Shipyards and shipbuilders operating in the 1920s

Location	Yard	Builder	Date operative
Appledore	Irsha Street 1 (Tavern Yard)	M. Blackmore	c.1890–1928
	Irsha Street 2 (Park Yard)	J. Hinks	1878–1967
	Irsha Street 3 (Ibex Yard)	P. Waters	1890–1970?[a]
	New Quay Dock	P.K. Harris	1908–54[b]
	Richmond Dock	R. Cock	1892–1932
Barnstaple	Taw Yard, Sticklepath	Taw Shipyards Ltd.	1920–22
Bideford	Bank End	Hansen Shipbuilding and Ship Repair Co. Ltd.	1919–24

a Closure date not known; still working in late 1960s.
b Operations merged with Richmond Dock on failure of R. Cock & Sons in 1932 and acquisition of Richmond Dock by P.K. Harris.

Appledore

Table 2 shows that there were two shipbuilding and three boatbuilding yards in Appledore, all with roots in the nineteenth century. Figure 3 shows the locations of these yards and that at Bank End in Bideford.

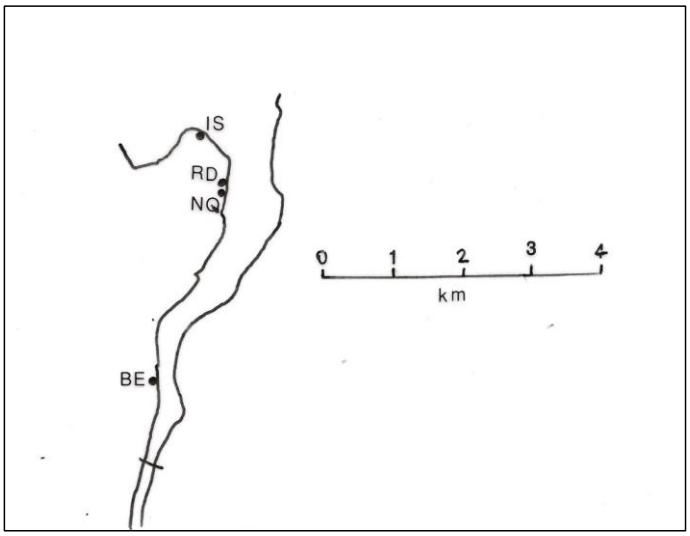

Figure 3: Shipbuilding and boatbuilding sites of the 1920s on the Torridge.

Three boatyards lay off Irsha Street, running down to the river Torridge. The Tavern Yard was run by the Blackmore family, who had commenced building in the nineteenth century at Hubbastone, further up the river. The Tavern Yard was found to be too small, and in 1928, Matthew Blackmore – by then running the operation – moved briefly to Boat Hyde, not that much further upstream than Hubbastone where his grandfather had worked, and then to Ford Yard above Bideford Long Bridge in 1933. Blackmores built launches and other small craft, producing five in the 1920s. The Ibex Yard was run by Philip Waters and Sons, also constructing launches, of which five were built in the 1920s.

Figure 4 captures the atmosphere of this year in the 1920s. Close by, the Park Yard was the site of building by John Hinks and Son, although most of their output at this time was of yet smaller open boats, especially the salmon boats used in the Taw and Torridge estuary and of the so-called ledge boats used off the beach at Bucks Mills and from the harbour at Clovelly. Alan Hinks took over a site at Watertown in 1967 to build the slightly larger yachts, passenger boats and fishing vessels which had become a speciality, whilst retaining the Park Yard. Alan Hinks achieved further fame in building replicas of Henry Hudson's *Nonsuch* in 1968 and Darke's *Golden Hind* in 1973.

Figure 4: Waters boatyard in the 1923
(painting by A W Lilley, supplied by David Carter)

Most people now approach Appledore via Richmond Road and Myrtle Street and pass the Richmond Dock, behind its wall on their right. The Richmond Dock lies at the heart of the Appledore tradition of shipbuilding and dates from 1849 to 1856, when it was constructed by James and William Yeo specifically to fit out vessels built by their yards in Prince Edward Island in Canada. The enterprise came to an end with the death of James Yeo in 1868 and his son William in 1872 and no male heirs to carry on the business. Robert Cock had been active at the Sea Gate Yard from the middle of the nineteenth century and took the opportunity to acquire the Richmond Yard in 1882, which was run by him and his sons until the business

failed in 1932. The Richmond Yard was then taken over by P.K. Harris and operations merged with their New Quay Yard.

Although the Richmond Yard produced a few steel steamships in the immediate post-First World War, the bulk of the new construction output was of barges and other smaller craft. P.K. Harris embarked on ship repair at New Quay Yard in 1908 and then began to build a few vessels, with the *P T Harris* – a wooden schooner of 130 tonnes – the last in 1912. Perhaps the loss of this vessel with several of his extended family in 1916 discouraged new construction of anything larger than a barge, of which four were built in the 1920s. The yard focused on ship repair until returning to new construction during the Second World War and thereafter.

Bideford

Nineteenth-century shipbuilding came to an end in Bideford in 1892 when the Bank End Yard of H.M. Restarick closed. However, in 1920, Sven Wohlford Hansen took out a lease on this site to build ships. Hansen had shipping and coal interests in South Wales and sought to build his own ships. Hansen Shipbuilding and Repairing Company was established in 1919 to build ships at Bideford. The yard built ten coasters, not all for the Hansen shipping interests, but the enterprise collapsed in 1924, no doubt in large part caused by overcommitment and exposure to the economic downturn in both colliery and shipping activity.

The playing fields behind the works passed to Bideford Borough Council, and now are the home of the Bideford Rugy Club. The main part of the site came into the hands of the Southern National Omnibus Company for use as the engineering depot for its North Devon fleet and the site was sold after the privatisation of the bus industry in 1986, being used for the headquarters of the Bideford Building Society, and then after this merged with the Bristol and West Building Society, the building became the offices of Torridge District Council. There is nothing now surviving at the site to hint at its long shipbuilding history.

Barnstaple

A similar fate befell the short-lived Taw Shipyard in Barnstaple. Shipbuilding in Barnstaple had come to an end in 1885 and John Westacott had closed the Sticklepath Yard and moved to build briefly in Appledore at the New Quay Yard. In 1918, the British Construction Company was one of several businesses established across the country to build concrete ships as part of a programme to replace shipping lost to enemy action in the First World War.

The locations had been chosen so as not to draw skilled men away from established shipbuilding sites. Percy Westacott, a further generation of the Westacott shipbuilding family, was the local manager on the site once run by his family. However, there were problems with the concrete building process, never satisfactorily resolved, and the yard closed in 1920, as did the other sites. The same year a new company, Taw Shipyards Ltd., was set up with headquarters in London, and Percy Westacott again as the local manager. The yard, which had cost in the order of £30,000 to set up for the concrete shipbuilding, was sold to the new company for £5,000. The yard launched five coastal steamers in 1921 but built no more and was finally dissolved in 1928. The yard remained derelict, and the slipways were still to be seen into the 1930s. Since then, the site was occupied by Devon Concrete Works and has now disappeared partly under the approaches to the high-level Taw Bridge built in 2007, and new housing developments built from 2018.

The Larger Ships Built

Table 3: The larger vessels built in North Devon, 1921–24[5]

Name	Other names	Gross tonnage	Date	Builder	Engines
Angus		605	1921	Taw	Aitchison, Blair Ltd., Clydebank
Craigolive		605	1921	Taw	Aitchison, Blair Ltd., Clydebank
Enid Mary	*Riverville* (1956)	605	1921	Taw	Aitchison, Blair Ltd., Clydebank
Gowerian	*Kinnaird Head* (1923)	449	1921	Taw	Aitchison, Blair Ltd., Clydebank
Hubbastone	*Jurgensby* (1940)	873	1921	Hansen	Lytham Shipbuilding & Engineering Co.
M J Craig	*Pool Fisher* (1935) *Holdernile* (1951)	605	1921	Taw	Aitchison, Blair Ltd., Clydebank
Monkstone 1	*Wild Rose* (1922) *Sussex Elm* (1951) *Holdernene* (1953)	873	1921	Hansen	Lytham S & E Co.
Monkstone 2	*Sussex Elm* (1946) *Sappho* (1951) *Kentbrook* (1953)	867	1923	Hansen	Lytham S & E Co.
Orenie	*Rockville* (1932)	484	1922	Cock	Plenty & Son, Newbury
Runnelstone	*Algeiba* (1946) *Foamville* (1954)	869	1923	Hansen	MacColl & Pollack, Sunderland
Stevenstone		873	1921	Hansen	Lytham S & E Co.
Sturdee Rose		873	1922	Hansen	Lytham S & E Co.
Taw	*Porthmeor* (1922)	449	1921	Taw	Aitchison, Blair Ltd., Clydebank
Wheatblade	*Denwick Head* (1933) *Morefield* (1946)	265	1923	Hansen	W Beardmore Ltd., Clydebank
Wheatcrop	*Rockville* (1953)	523	1924	Hansen	W Beardmore Ltd., Clydebank
Wheathill	*Rathmore* (1933) *Rimsdale* (1937) *Comala* (1948)	265	1923	Hansen	W Beardmore Ltd., Clydebank
Wheatplain		523	1924	Hansen	W Beardmore Ltd., Clydebank

[5] Shipping and Shipbuilding Database <www.shippingandshipbuilding.uk> [accessed January 2023].

Table 3 gives a summary of the larger steamships built in North Devon in the 1920s. It shows that six were built in Barnstaple to two basic designs, ten were built at Bideford to three basic designs, and that a single ship was built at Appledore. In terms of gross tonnage, these were among the larger vessels ever built in North Devon, but only the five 800–900-tonne steamers constructed at Bideford, with a net tonnage of around 430 tonnes, were significantly larger than the many schooners and brigantines of between 100 and 200 tonnes, which were such a feature of nineteenth-century building in North Devon. Only the *Orenie* was first owned in North Devon, in this case by her builders, Robert Cock and Sons. Five were built by Hansen at Bank End for their own shipping interests and registered variously at Cardiff and London.

North Devon had always been integrated in the maritime affairs of the Bristol Channel, and until the nineteenth century, this meant being subordinate to some degree to Bristol. The rise of copper smelting in Swansea and later of coal exports from Cardiff lead to South Wales playing more of a leading role, and this was reflected in the ownership of the vessels built in North Devon in the 1920s. Besides the five vessels built by Hansen for its shipping interests, three further steamers went to smaller Cardiff-based enterprises. The four *Wheat*-prefixed steamers built by Hansen went to Spillers Ltd. flour millers and were also registered in Cardiff. It seems clear that Sven Hansen's contacts with the Cardiff shipping community must have played some part in securing these orders. Curiously, the Reardon-Smith line based in Cardiff – and whose founder William Reardon Smith came from Appledore – never placed any orders with North Devon yards, even though the company was to register many of its ships at Bideford, a port too shallow to be reached by most of them.

[INSERT TABLE 4]

Table 4 summarises the working life of the North Devon-built steamers. Overall, they had a respectable mean working life of 23.6 years, with two lasting into the 1960s. However, even in the first half of the twentieth century, seafaring was a hazardous business. Nine of the vessels were lost or sank and one further was the victim of enemy action. Leaving these casualties aside, then the mean working age of the North Devon-built vessels was nearly 29 years, although in the days of wooden sailing vessels, there was the expectation that they would last for 30–40 years, and some passed their half-century.

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Some of the North Devon-built steamers had interesting careers and many passed through several ownerships. A selection of the vessels and their careers will be discussed. One of the first steamers launched at Barnstaple was the *Craigolive*, of the larger design built there. As with all the Taw Shipyard vessels, she had engines supplied by Aitchison, Blair Ltd. of Clydebank. She and her sister ship, the *M J Craig*, were supplied to H. Craig and Co. of Belfast. One can only speculate that the Workman and Clark yard in Belfast was too busy to be able to meet this demand and that Harland and Wolff were only interested in very much larger vessels.

Figure 5 shows the *Craigolive* at Cardiff in 1921. She continued to work for H. Craig until 1965, when she was taken to Passage West on Cork Harbour to be broken up. At this time, she was the last of the North Devon-built steamers of the 1920s to survive.

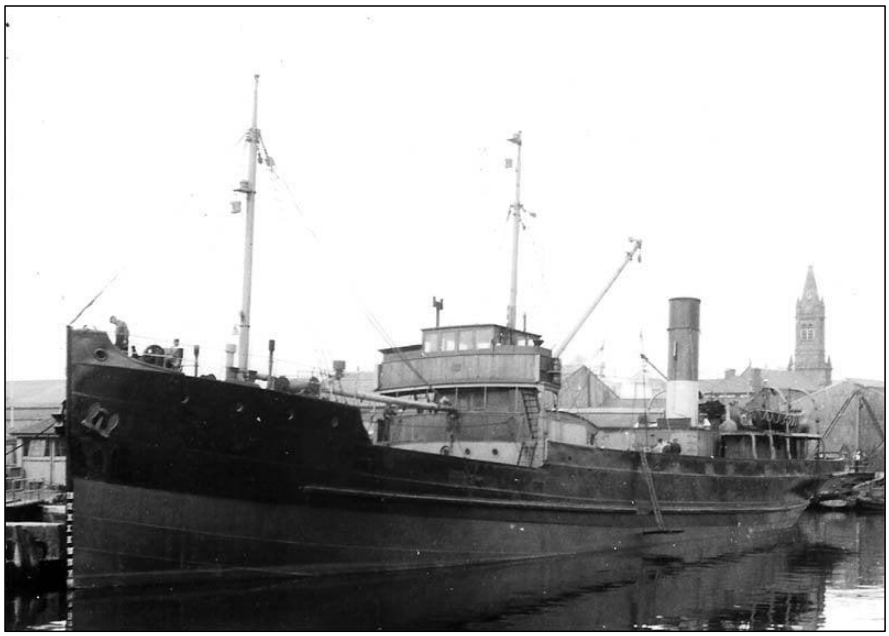

Figure 5: *Craigolive* at Cardiff in 1921
(Phil Goodinson Collection via Shipping and Shipbuilding Database)[6]

The first steamer to be launched from Bank End in Bideford by the Hansen Yard was the *Hubbastone*, of 873 tonnes, and one of the largest built in North Devon in the 1920s. She was given engines manufactured by the Lytham Shipbuilding and Engineering Company. Hubbastone is the name of a locality on the Torridge, just south of Appledore.

Figure 6 shows *Hubbastone* on the occasion of her launch. Hansen had built the ship for their own use, but with the financial troubles of the company, she was sold on in 1924 to Stone and Rolfe Ltd. of London but registered at Llanelli. She was caught at Dieppe in May 1940 and bombed and sunk by the Luftwaffe, only to be raised, repaired and passed on to J. Jost of Flensburg in Germany. She was lost in unknown circumstances off the island of Rügen in the Baltic in June 1943.

[6] Shipping and Shipbuilding Database <www.shippingandshipbuilding.uk> [accessed January 2023].

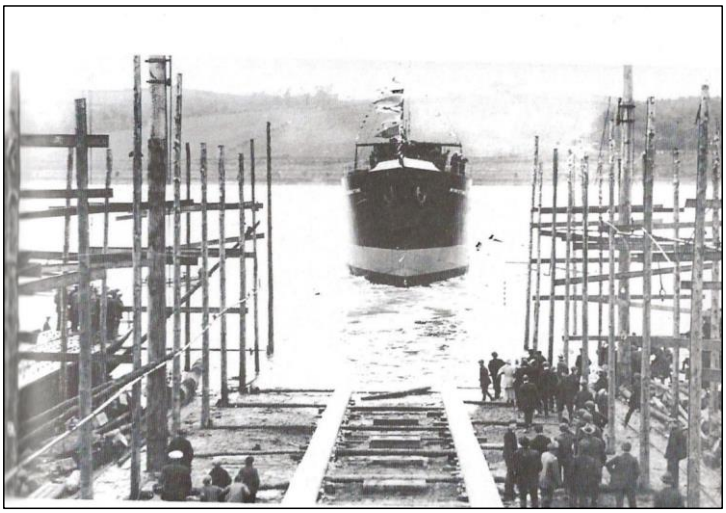

Figure 6: *Hubbastone* just after launching at Bank End, January 1921
(unattributed picture in L. Harris, *A Two Hundred Year History of Appledore Shipyards*)[7]

The *Runnelstone* was the last of the larger vessels built by Hansen at Bank End, but unlike her sistership the *Hubbastone*, her engines came from MacColl and Pollack of Sunderland, who supplied just this vessel of those built by Hansen. The Runnelstone is a rock reef off Gwennap Head in Cornwall. She is shown in Figure 7, after two further changes of ownership. As with her sistership, she was sold to Stone and Rolfe on the collapse of the Hansen business and remained in their service until 1946, when sold to R.H. Penney and Sons and renamed *Algeiba.* Then in 1954 she was sold on to John S. Monks Ltd. of Liverpool, whose company acquired a couple of other North Devon-built ships. At this change of ownership, she was once more given a new name, this time *Foamville*, in keeping with J.S. Monks's pattern of using the suffix *ville* for its ships. She did not last too long in her final ownership, being damaged in a collision on the Manchester Ship Canal in March 1961, and a couple of months later was taken to Preston to be broken up.

[7] Len Harris, *A Two Hundred Year History of Appledore Shipyards* (Hargill, 1992).

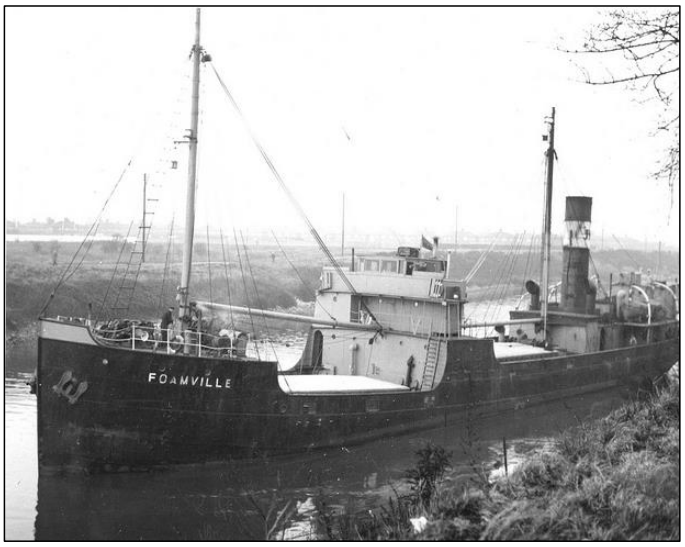

Figure 7: *Foamville (*ex *Runnelstone*)
(photographer unknown from Shipping and Shipbuilding Database)[8]

Hansen continued construction into 1924, with four vessels of two different designs for Spillers. These ships were all given the prefix *Wheat* and all had engines supplied by William Beardmore Ltd of Clydebank. The *Wheatplain* at 523 tonnes was one of two larger ships and had only a short career, being wrecked off Tory Island, Co Donegal in March 1930 on passage from Birkenhead to Westport, Co Mayo, with flour.

Her sister ship, the *Wheatcrop*, served with Spillers until 1953, when she was sold to John S. Monks Ltd of Liverpool and renamed *Rockville.* In this latter guise she is shown in Figure 8. She was sent to Barrow for breaking up in July 1956. The two smaller vessels of 265 tonnes were the *Wheatblade* and the *Wheathill.* The latter was sold in 1933 to W.A. Leith of Aberdeen and renamed *Rathmore*. In 1937 she was then sold to George Couper and Co., also of Aberdeen, to be renamed *Rimsdale.* A final change of ownership and another renaming occurred in 1948, when she became the *Comala* of the Mac Shipping Co. Ltd. of Glasgow. She is shown in their ownership in Figure 9.

[8] Shipping and Shipbuilding Database <www.shippingandshipbuilding.uk> [accessed January 2023].

Figure 8: *Rockville* (ex *Wheatcrop*)
(Clive Ketley Collection from Shipping and Shipbuilding Database)[9]

Figure 9: *Comala* (ex *Wheathill*)
(Richard Cox Collection from Shipping and Shipbuilding Database)[10]

[9] Shipping and Shipbuilding Database <www.shippingandshipbuilding.uk> [accessed January 2023]
[10] Ibid.

Ship Repair

It is difficult to quantify ship repair in the same way as can be done for shipbuilding. The tonnage of a vessel means little compared to the nature of repair carried out and the term 'repair' covers a great deal, from routine maintenance and dealing with normal wear and tear to dealing with significant structural damage or installing new engines – and even in some cases, major rebuilding to equip a vessel for new tasks.

In his history of Appledore's shipyards, Len Harris comments that ship repair kept the whole operation going in the 1920s, especially as no larger vessels were built there between 1922 and 1939.[11] He makes the point that Appledore was one of a handful of places where repairs to steel as well as wooden vessels could be carried out, and that the workforce was trained in both modern and more traditional practices, although he suggests that especially among the older employees, there was a preference for working with wood.

All vessels had to be dry-docked every four years for survey to maintain classification with Lloyds, and rather like the modern MOT test, owners would get their vessels checked over and essential work carried out before submitting them to survey. There was clearly enough of this kind of work as Lloyds in 1925 had a surveyor in Plymouth for the south coasts of Devon and Cornwall and one, Mr T. Pearce of Appledore, for the north coast. Another important aspect of ship repair at Appledore was the fitting and replacement of the auxiliary engines installed in most of the locally owned fleet of sailing ketches.

Conclusions

The decade 1920–1929 was a difficult one for North Devon shipbuilding. By the end, only Appledore maintained facilities capable of building ships as opposed to small craft. To contemporary observers, it must have seemed a very open question as to whether shipbuilding would survive anywhere in North Devon. The decade saw the last ships launched at both Barnstaple and Bideford, and Appledore kept going by repairing steel ships and sustaining the last fleet of wooden sailing vessels in Britain, which was now concentrated in Appledore, Bideford and Braunton.

[11] Len Harris, *A Two Hundred Year History of Appledore Shipyards* (Hargill, 1992), p. 36.