Struggle For Survival – The End of an Era

The Dartmouth Lumpers and the Coaling Companies in 1920s Dartmouth

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By the end of the nineteenth century, Dartmouth had established itself as the leading coal port on the south coast, bunkering (topping up) steamships with coal at the start or end of their trip. At its peak, over 40 ships a week called into Dartmouth to be topped up with coal, stored in floating wooden hulks anchored around the harbour, by crews of coal lumpers, waiting on the dockside for the call.

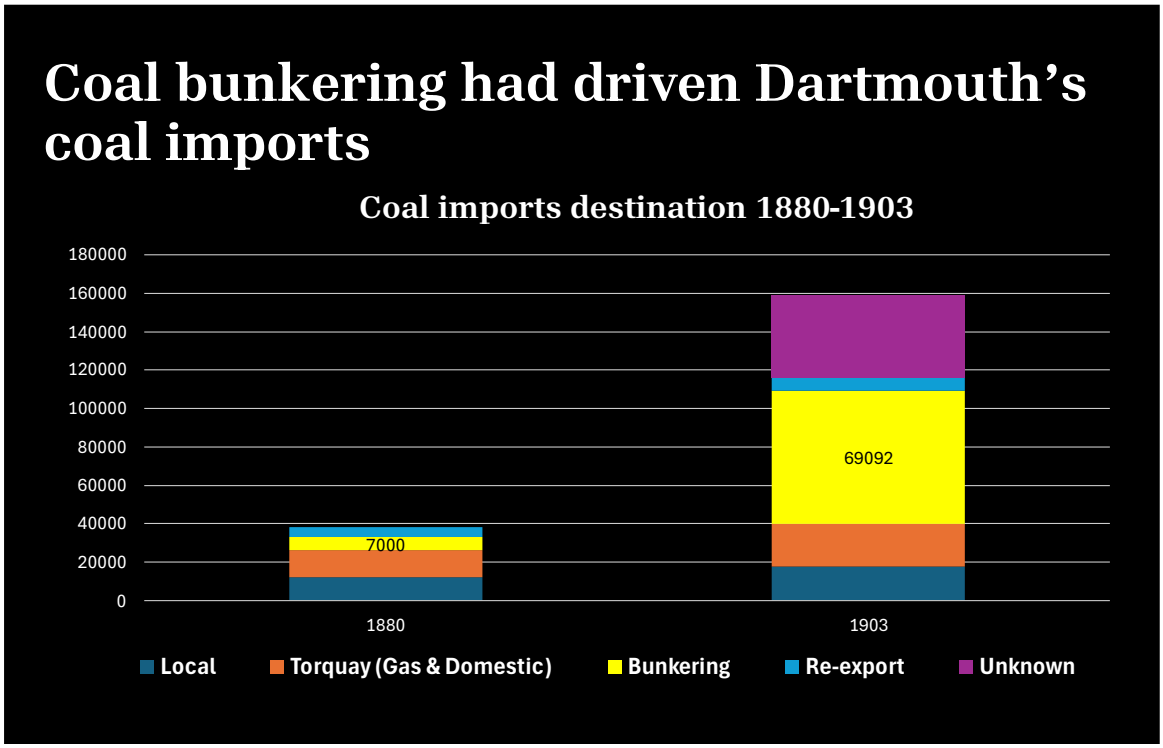


Figure 1: Coal imports by destination, 1990–1903.[1]

[1] Various sources, including C.R. Potts, *The Newton Abbot to Kingswear Railway (1844–1988)* (Oakwood Press, 1989).

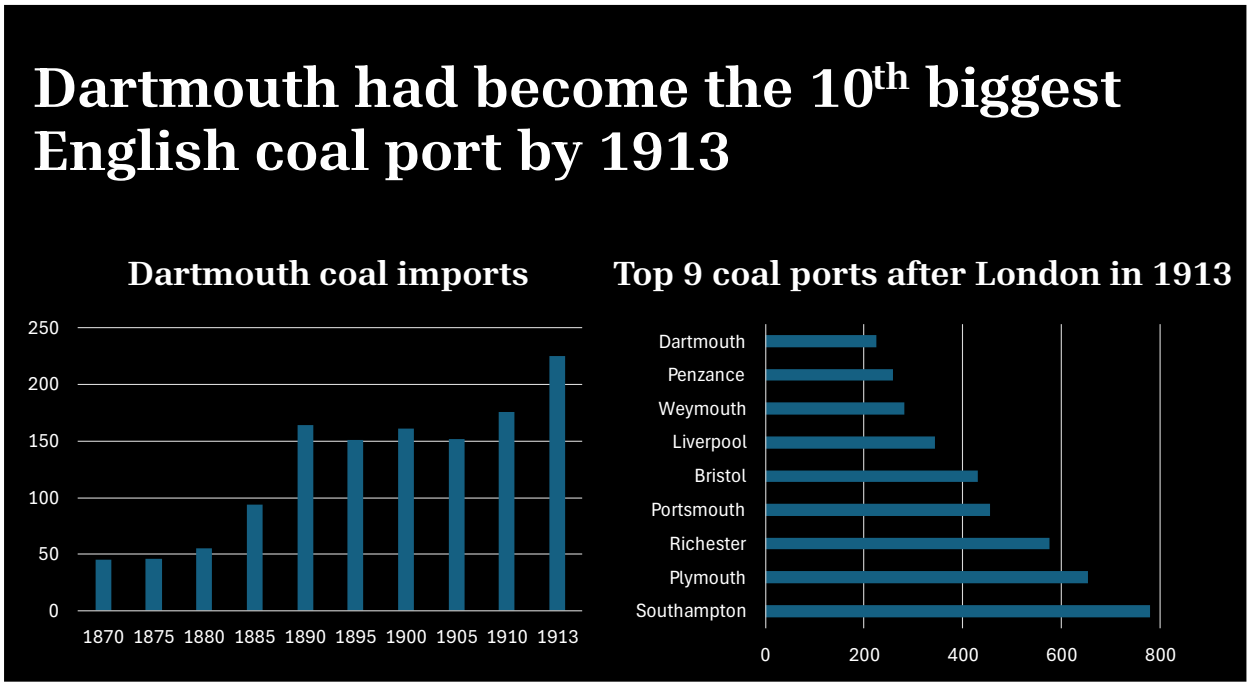


Figure 2: Top nine coal ports and the popularity of Dartmouth.[2]

This was hard, dirty, dangerous and unhealthy work for the men who depended wholly on this trade for their living. It was piece work, paid by the tonne loaded or unloaded, mainly by hand, sometimes with the help of a winch or crane. They were organised in gangs of six to eight men, each with a foreman who wore a bowler hat, see Figure 3 showing two gangs in a hulk off Dartmouth's Combe Mud.

[2] Michael Duffy, Stephen Fisher, Basil Greenhill, David Starkey And Joyce Youings, *The New Maritime History of Devon Volume II* (Conway Maritime Press Ltd, 1994).

Figure 3: Lumpers on a coal barge and hulk off Combe Mud, Dartmouth, c.1880.[3]

Each gang waited on the Embankment or at Bayards Cove and raced the other gangs in their gig to be first to an incoming ship and secure the job. A lumper wrote to the *Dartmouth Chronicle* describing the tension and effort involved in being the first gang to meet the ship:

A LUMPER writes as follows: "I hardly know how it could be prevented but I want to draw your attention to the difficulty some of us experience at times, in getting to the boats first, though we may have sighted a steamer a long time before anyone else. We are, for instance, on a hill overlooking the offing and suddenly descry a steamer making for the harbor. Of course we make all speed for Bayard's Cove, but somehow or other the lumpers gathered there get wind of our running—they have not seen the steamer mind you—and by the time we get to the quay the boats are full and there is no room for us, who were the first to discover the vessel. I have managed once or twice to crawl down the steps leading from Newcomin Road and then make a rush, which has been successful, but more often than not it is the other way about."

Figure 4: Article by a lumper in the *Dartmouth Chronicle*, September 1898.[4]

[3] Image courtesy of Dartmouth Museum.
[4] *Dartmouth Chronicle*, September 1898.

Most jobs were to shift between 200 and 1,800 tonnes of coal as fast as possible.[5] Four to eight back-breaking hours later, the men would return to their crowded cottages and tenements. The standard working week was a maximum of 44 hours before overtime was incurred. As shown in the graphic below, they lived near the harbour – around Clarence Street, Higher Street, Silver Street, Lower Street and St Saviour's – so they could get to their gig boats quickly and to clean up, eat and rest, ready for the next vessel.

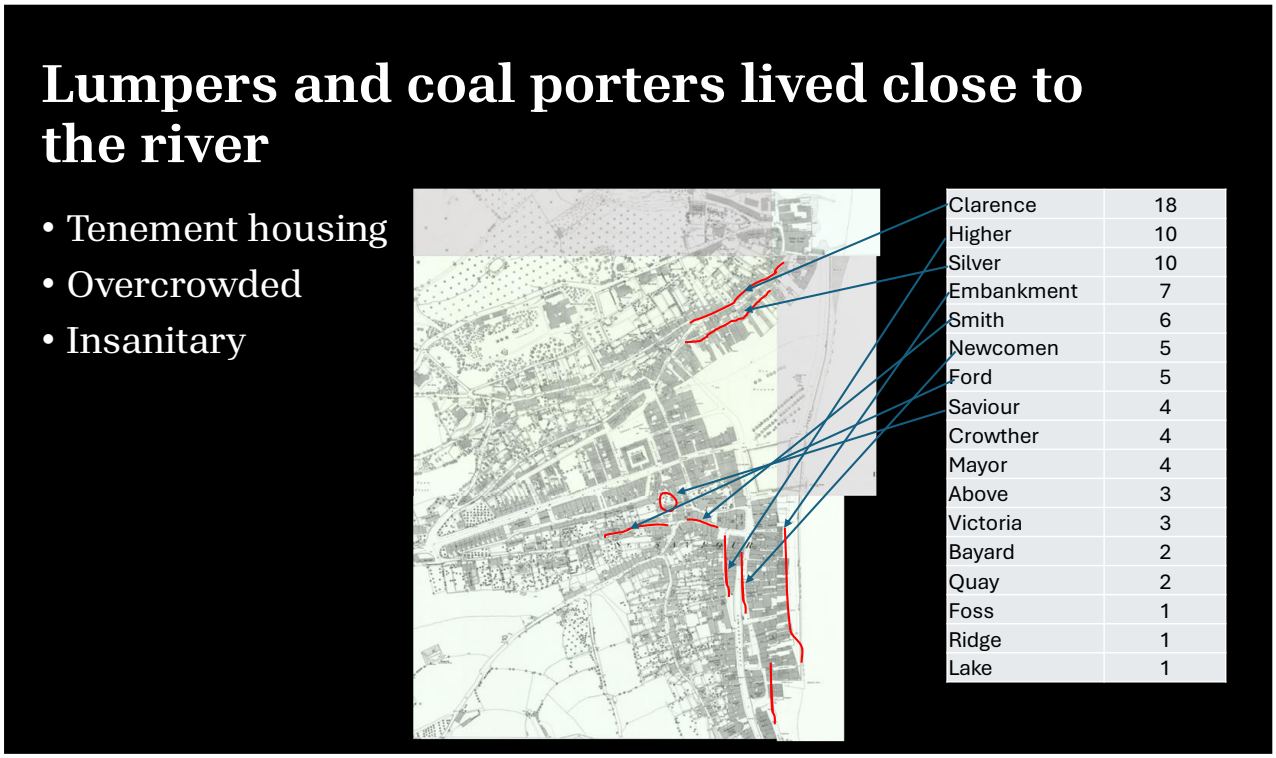


Figure 5: Location of residence of lumpers and coal porters.[6]

The houses rented by the lumpers were small and had no power or running water. This could lead to overcrowding and insanitary and unhealthy conditions. A 1914 report by local government investigator Dr F. St. George Mivart highlighted the risks and dangers of this class of housing and was highly critical of the town council.

[5] Ivor Smart, 'The Dartmouth Bunkering Coal Trade', *Dartmouth Harbour Papers* (South West Maritime History Society, 1998).
[6] Author's analysis of Findmypast 1921 census, www.findmypast.co.uk/1921-census.

It is difficult to understand how any sanitary authority can tolerate the existence of such dens as some of those visited. In Silver Street in one tenement I found an enormous collection of foul rags in a central room having no light or ventilation. A portion of the living room in this place was boarded off to contain a hopper w.c. with flushing apparatus broken; the pan broken and plugged with rags.

Another tenement close by was found inhabited by an aged bedridden woman, with whom dwelt her son, also apparently an invalid, whose sleeping room was extremely filthy. The whole of these premises are much out of repair and wanting in light and air. Similar defects and want of lighting and air were found at other tenement houses such as D

Figure 6: Extract from Dr Mivart's report of 1914.[7]

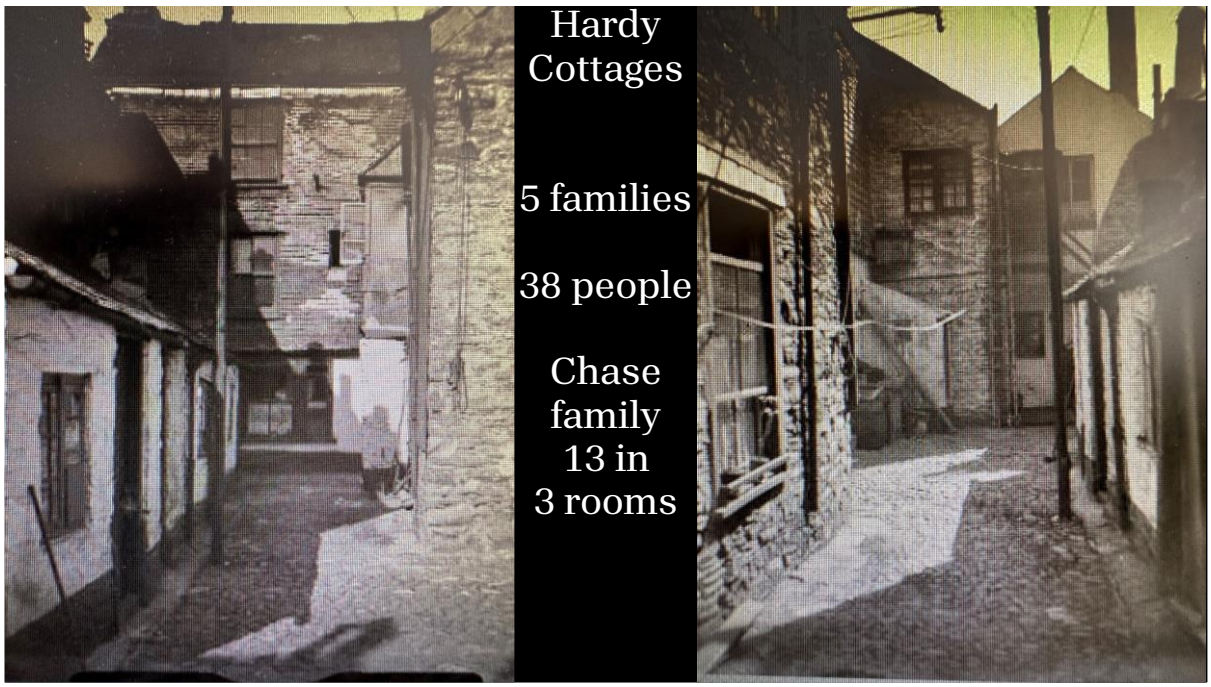


Figure 7: The Hardy and Chase families were lumpers living near the Embankment.[8]

Some families managed well, through a combination of natural health, resilience and good humour, as evidenced by the recollections of one of the Hardy children, interviewed by Ray Freeman in 1988.

> We had very little money as father was only paid when he had coaled a boat. Mother could not work outside the home with all those children. However, one grocer was very trusting – Figgy Andrews gave credit on promise of being paid when we had the

[7] *Dr Mivart's Report on the Public Health & Housing in Dartmouth 1914*, in the Dartmouth Museum archive.
[8] Courtesy of Dartmouth Museum.

money. To help with food, father had had a garden out by the castle, near where the ferry now lands. He grew all the vegetables we ever ate, mainly potatoes, and kept chickens. Mother went out every day to feed these and their eggs were the only ones we ever had. Potatoes were the main things we ate. When the mackerel were shoaling, we all fished for them with home-made lines made of string and bent pin – we never bought lines.

We were a happy family and had to make our own entertainment. In summer, the older ones took the younger ones out to Sugary Cove to play. We only had one costume between us so we had to take turns to bathe and none of us ever learned to swim.[9]

The main job roles of lumpers

A study of lumpers in Sydney in 1904 by Margo Beasy gives us insights into the different job roles of men in a lumper gang.[10] Beasy describes five categories of work in Sydney, and this can be applied directly to the Dartmouth situation, as lumping was an international trade with expectations and rates agreed by shipowners across the world.

Shovellers

Shovellers worked in the hold and shovelled the loose coal into the lowered basket: each shovel lift was around 16 lb. The work was continuous and so was literally back breaking as workers had limited opportunity to straighten their backs.

Winchdrivers

Winchdrivers winched the loaded basket, weighing 250 lb, up to the deck level. It had to be at a safe speed to avoid it slipping, falling back and injuring the shovellers below. While not so laborious work, it was highly stressful as they operated the winch continuously through jobs that could last 20 or even 30 hours. Many left the job due to psychological distress.

Planksmen

Planksmen walked (or ran) along a 16-inch plank, carrying the basket on their shoulders from the coal hulk to the vessel being coaled, about 30 feet above the deck. Again, this was highly stressful but dangerous work, which led to many retiring early.

Carriers

Carriers took the basket from the planksmen and carried it to a chute, which directed it into the hold and the waiting trimmers below.

[9] Interview of Muriel Chase by Ray Freeman in 1988, Courtesy of Dartmouth Museum.
[10] Margo Beasy, 'Sarah Dawes and the Coal Lumpers: Absence and Presence on the Sydney Waterfront, 1900–1917' (Thesis, University of Wollongong, 2004).

Trimmers

Trimmers worked in the hold of the coaled ship, once enough coal had been loaded. Their task was to redistribute the coal evenly within the bunker. They worked in semi-darkness, and at times, great heat, for hours at a time. The air in the hold was thick with coal dust that the men would spit out for hours after the end of a shift.

Figure 8: Trimmers redistributing coal within the ship's bunker in Sydney.[11]

As a result, Dartmouth was noisy and dirty: shrill train whistles, deafening ships' foghorns and the grinding of cranes and winches, at all hours, day and night. All the while a thick layer of black dust settled everywhere, on the sheets drying in the courtyards and the pristine sails of the gentleman's yachts in the Bight.[12]

[11] Courtesy of the State Library of Victoria.

[12] Ray Freeman, *Dartmouth and Its Neighbours: A History of the Port and its People* (Richard Webb, 2007).

Figure 9: Naval review in Dartmouth, 1897 – gentlemen's yachts at the ready.[13]

Dartmouth's coaling companies

Dart Harbour Commission had licenced three coaling companies to maintain a coal hulk in the harbour – and for years competition between the companies kept refuelling costs low for steamers. But by 1912, one company, a Welsh coal business owned by Commander Evans Reid, had acquired all the others and achieved a monopoly in Dartmouth. Evans Reid also owned similar operations in Weymouth and Portland, and later, in 1922, he bought the Brixham bunkering company. This gave him a monopoly position with unprecedented power to set rates and wages and determine working practices.

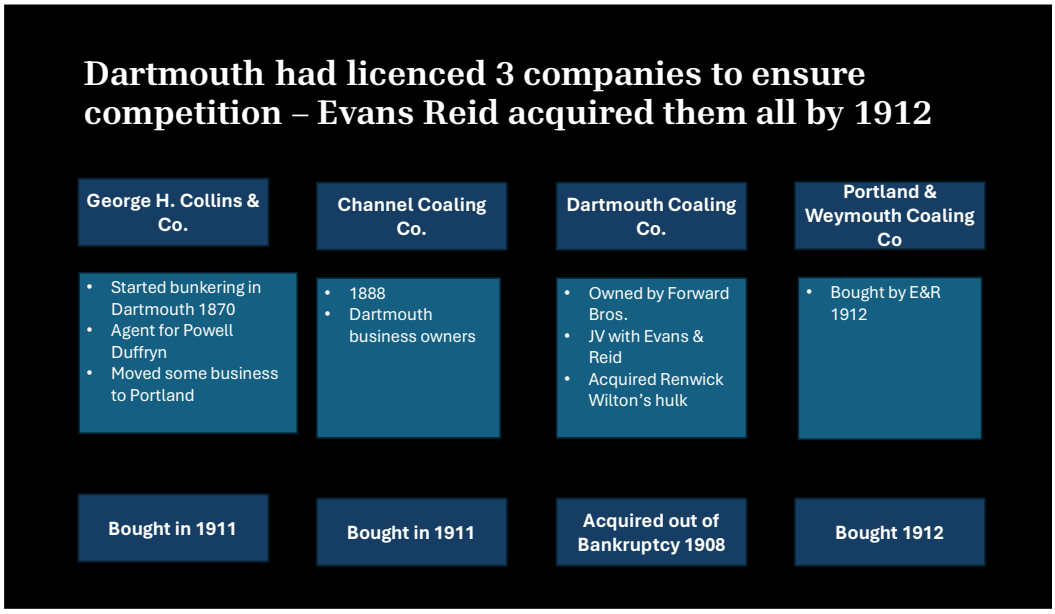


Figure 10: Evans Reid acquisitions by 1912 (E&R is an acronym for Evans & Reid).[14]

[13] Courtesy of Dartmouth Museum.
[14] Source: various newspaper reports.

The 1913 strike

Before the First World War, there were 200–300 lumpers in Dartmouth and double that of men and women in associated dockwork. It was by far the largest employer in the town, controlling the livelihoods of around 1,000 family members.[15] The lumpers felt threatened by E&R's monopoly, and resentment grew as lumpers' rates of 2d per tonne hadn't changed for 20 years. As a result, average earnings were around £1.50 a week, and volumes were falling due to Brixham's new bunkering operation, which had been set up in 1913. A strong sense of injustice and community spirit gave them the courage to take E&R on.

In 1913, a strike was called in support of a rate increase to 3d per tonne, but Dartmouth Coaling Company (owned by E&R) simply told shipowners to avoid Dartmouth and call at their other ports further up the coast. On their own, the Dartmouth lumpers weren't strong enough and after protracted and fruitless negotiations, they returned to work. However, the strike had attracted the attention of the Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Workers Union and their organisers, including Dan Hillman from Plymouth and Ernest Bevin, the regional organiser from Bristol, who came to Dartmouth for meetings in January 1914. A noisy meeting in the Guildhall on Thursday 29 January confirmed the formation of Dartmouth's branch of the Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Workers Union, and over 400 dock workers signed up, ready to fight for their cause.[16]. The dispute dragged on during the spring and the Union tried to negotiate, but the dispute was settled with little change. The declaration of war in August 1914 intervened, and many of the younger lumpers left the town for a different fight, some never to return.

Figure 11: Lumpers on Kingswear Station, leaving Dartmouth for the war in 1915.[17]

[15] Author's analysis of 1921 census, adjusted for trends from 1913–21, together with press reports.
[16] *Western Morning News*, 30 January 1914.
[17] Courtesy of Dartmouth Museum.

The war years

During the war, labour shortages meant earnings boomed for those that remained, with reported earnings of up to £8–10 a week. E&R's response was to invest in labour-saving, mechanised cranes floating on pontoons, each crane capable of replacing most of a gang of lumpers.

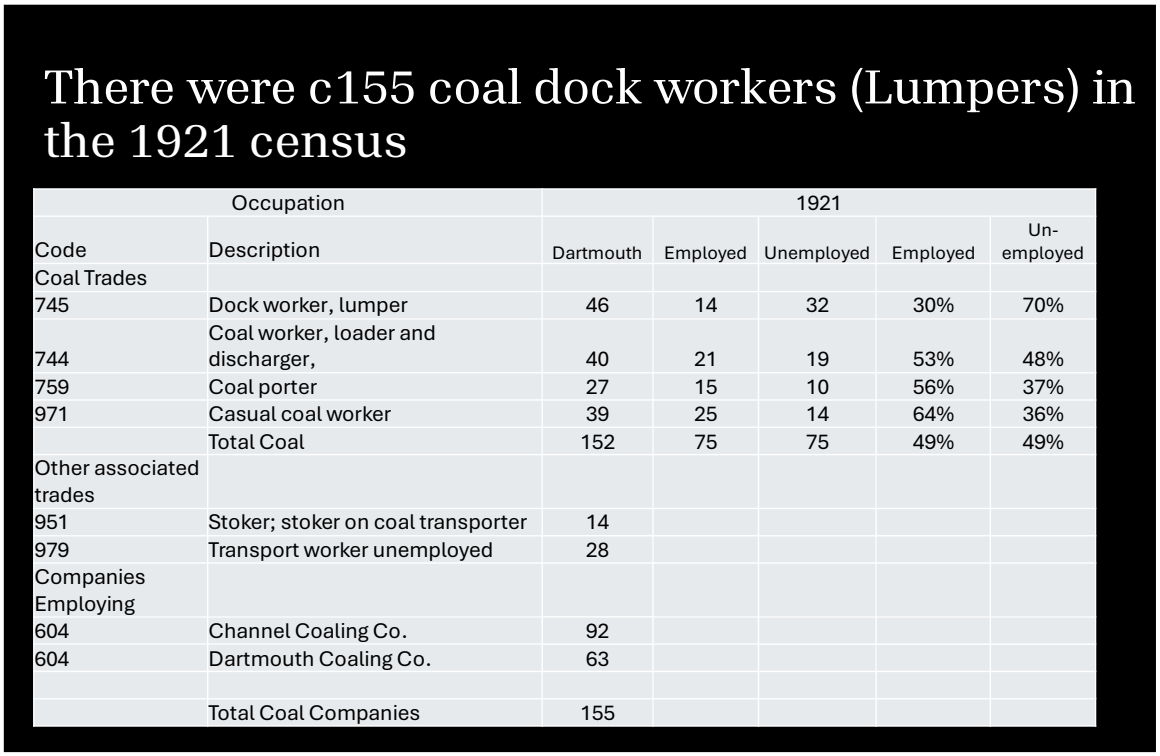
In 1917, a threatened strike was solved by arbitration, which introduced a new way of working called pool and rota, an approach that was already used by Bristol docks. The pool was a fixed group of men signed on by the Union, who then supplied the men on rotation to the coaling companies. At the end of the week, earnings were shared among pool members. Competition between lumper gangs was ended and a 'community of brothers' was established, most of whom had been born in Dartmouth.

A land fit for heroes

The survivors of the war returned, having been promised by Lloyd George's coalition government 'a land fit for heroes', but global trade was suffering and Britain was struggling to maintain its dominant industrial position in the face of new competition, particularly from America. A slump in shipping from late 1921 hit Dartmouth hard, with ship visits collapsing from 800–1,000 per annum to 500–600 per annum between 1919 and 1921.[18] Despite the pool shareouts, family earnings fell back to £1.50 a week, exacerbated by the significantly higher costs of living.

Analysis of the 1921 census shows that there were 155 or so coal dockworkers in Dartmouth. The coding in the census has four different definitions of jobs associated with coal, and it is not clear how respondents were able to distinguish between them accurately or consistently across the workforce. As the total number in the census is 152, which is very close to the total number of Dartmouth lumpers quoted in many different articles of 150, it is probable that the term 'lumper' was used as a general term for people working in the dock-based coal trades.

7 Author's compilation of data from various sources including Don Collinson, *The Chronicles of Dartmouth: An Historical Yearly Log, 1854–1954* (Richard Webb, 2000).



Occupation		1921				
Code	Description	Dartmouth	Employed	Unemployed	Employed	Un-employed
Coal Trades						
745	Dock worker, lumper	46	14	32	30%	70%
744	Coal worker, loader and discharger,	40	21	19	53%	48%
759	Coal porter	27	15	10	56%	37%
971	Casual coal worker	39	25	14	64%	36%
	Total Coal	152	75	75	49%	49%
Other associated trades						
951	Stoker; stoker on coal transporter	14				
979	Transport worker unemployed	28				
Companies Employing						
604	Channel Coaling Co.	92				
604	Dartmouth Coaling Co.	63				
	Total Coal Companies	155				

Figure 12: Numbers of lumpers in the 1921 Census.[19]

What is also clear is that unemployment was already averaging 50 per cent at this time – June 1921 – before any of the impacts of global recession hit.

Unemployment in Dartmouth

After the war, unemployment grew across Devon, a county already vulnerable due to its growing reliance on the seasonal tourist trade. In October 1921 there were 200 men and women unemployed and receiving the Unemployment Benefit in Dartmouth. Unemployment Benefit had been introduced by the Conservative government in 1920 and would have been worth around £1.50 a week for a family. The Union and local charities pressured local and central authorities for help, and public work schemes were identified to provide work and wages to a few, including further improvements to the South Embankment. Despite this, unemployment in Dartmouth continued to rise to 238 in November.[20].

[19] Findmypast 1921 census, www.findmypast.co.uk/1921-census.
[20] *Dartmouth Chronicle*.

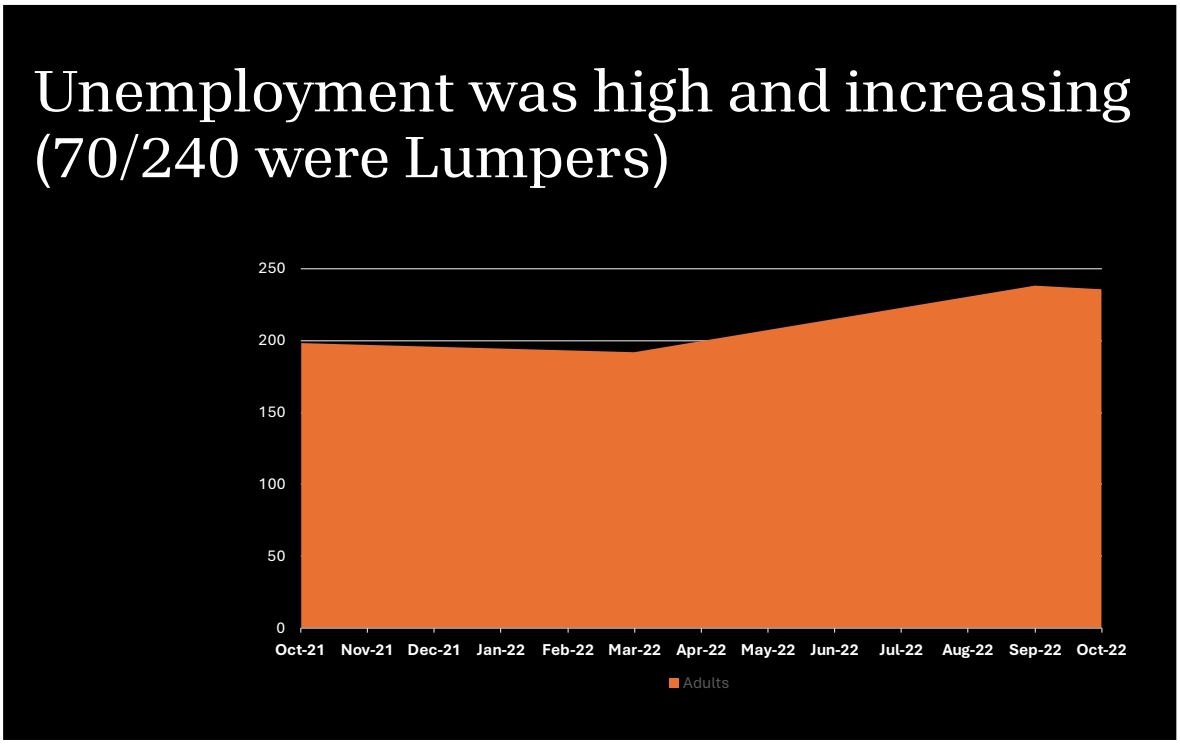


Figure 13: Unemployment figures in Dartmouth.[21]

The lumpers' situation was becoming desperate; many were relying on credit from local shops already and living off mackerel caught in the harbour by hand lines or unsellable parts of the local fishermen's catches. Housing conditions in the tenements were basic and tough, especially for larger families. Most cottages or apartments were unlit with no power, sanitation or running water. Communal pumps and toilets were cared for corporately, providing water for cooking and washing, with the order of bathing being strictly maintained in favour of the working men, and finishing with the youngest children in water that was cold and grimy. Three-room cottages around courtyards housing families of ten or more was not uncommon.[22] At times like these, the town authorities opened up the Soup Kitchen, and queues formed twice weekly in the market, with up to 500 people buying a total of 150 gallons of soup for 1d a pint in November 2021.

E&R had established a strong position in the south coast bunkering trade before the war, and secured their position in 1922 with the acquisition of Cadeby's operation in Brixham. This meant that they now controlled bunkering operations along the south coast, from Plymouth to Portland, giving them an even stronger position to negotiate with their workforces.

[21] Author's compilation from local newspaper reports (Dartmouth Chronicle and other local papers).
[22] Oral history recorded by Ray Freeman – Dartmouth Museum Archives talking with Muriel Williams née Chase of Hardy Cottages.

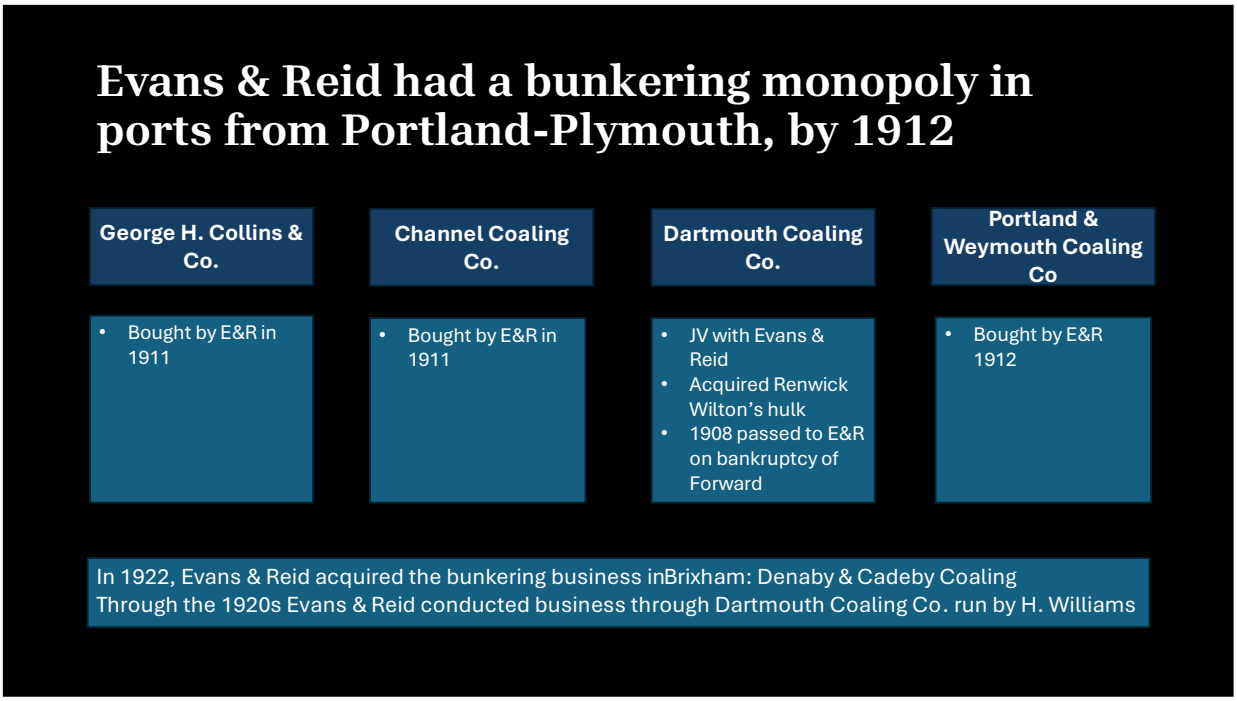


Figure 14: E&R's bunkering monopoly by 1912.

Build-up to the lock-out

The Dartmouth Coaling Company (controlled by E&R) saw this as an opportunity to change the way things worked in Dartmouth for bunkering. With fewer ships calling and the new cranes installed (see Figure 15), in September they made an offer to employ 50 men directly with a minimum wage of £1.50 a week. In addition, there would be no overtime, the pool and rota system would be dismantled, and the piece-work rate would be reduced from 2d to 1d per tonne. The company did not feel responsible for all Dartmouth dockworkers and said that they could not be expected to set rates to support them all. None of the lumpers applied for the jobs, and their Union responded with a demand to increase the rate to 3d per tonne and retain the pool and rota system. They were prepared to negotiate on overtime and some outdated conditions that no longer applied, but they needed a living wage (£1.50 a week was equivalent to the unemployment benefit, and the Union did not believe that this was a living wage).

Figure 15: Floating crane in Dartmouth.[23]

The lock-out

Dartmouth Coaling Company (DCC) responded by locking the men out, closing Dartmouth for bunkering and directing shipowners to their other ports; it was the start of a long and bitter dispute, with both sides convinced of the rightness of their cause. DCC could only see work for 50 men and wanted to employ them directly, rather than through the Union, and certainly not using the pool and rota system. They offered a guaranteed wage of £1.50 a week, with the opportunity to earn £2.75 a week if all hours were worked. The Union argued that these men had built prosperity for the port and the town, and that they deserved a living wage. They asked what was to become of the unwanted men, who would be cast aside by 'up to date, hell-born, commercialism'.[24] The men wanted to live together in a fair and equitable social system, and they would not give up the pool and rota system, which was simply 'putting into practice the principles of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount'.

DCC refused to negotiate with any third party, including the Unions, and resisted attempts by DHC to arbitrate; negotiations were carried out in letters to the *Chronicle* from either side and in public meetings. They also pressurised workers in their other ports to carry on working. The Dartmouth men who were locked out as part of a labour dispute did not qualify for Unemployment Benefit, and must have survived on charity and Union hand-outs. Letters to

[23] Courtesy of Dartmouth Museum, Cyril King collection.
[24] *Dartmouth and South Hams Chronicle*, 18 March 1923, speech by Jasper Richards, a Plymouth official from the Transport Workers' Union.

the *Chronicle* became even more desperate as shipbuilders Philips at Noss laid off more men to add to the ranks of the unemployed.

In July 1922, after nine months of this stand-off, the government got involved and arbitrated a three-day meeting, which ended with an agreement. The agreement was not published, but from Dart Harbour Commission minutes appears to have favoured the DCC. Mechanisation was accepted; overtime would only be paid after midnight; and the piece rate was decreased to a little above the DCC's opening offer of 1d. Net, the DCC had reduced their labour costs by 50–60 per cent. For the lumpers, however, the pool and rota system was maintained and operated by the Union, while entry to the pool was restricted to sons of existing members.

In reality, the lumper community was ageing, with the average age in 1921 of over 45, and it was likely that most sons would look for easier, less physical and dangerous work than that tolerated by their fathers.

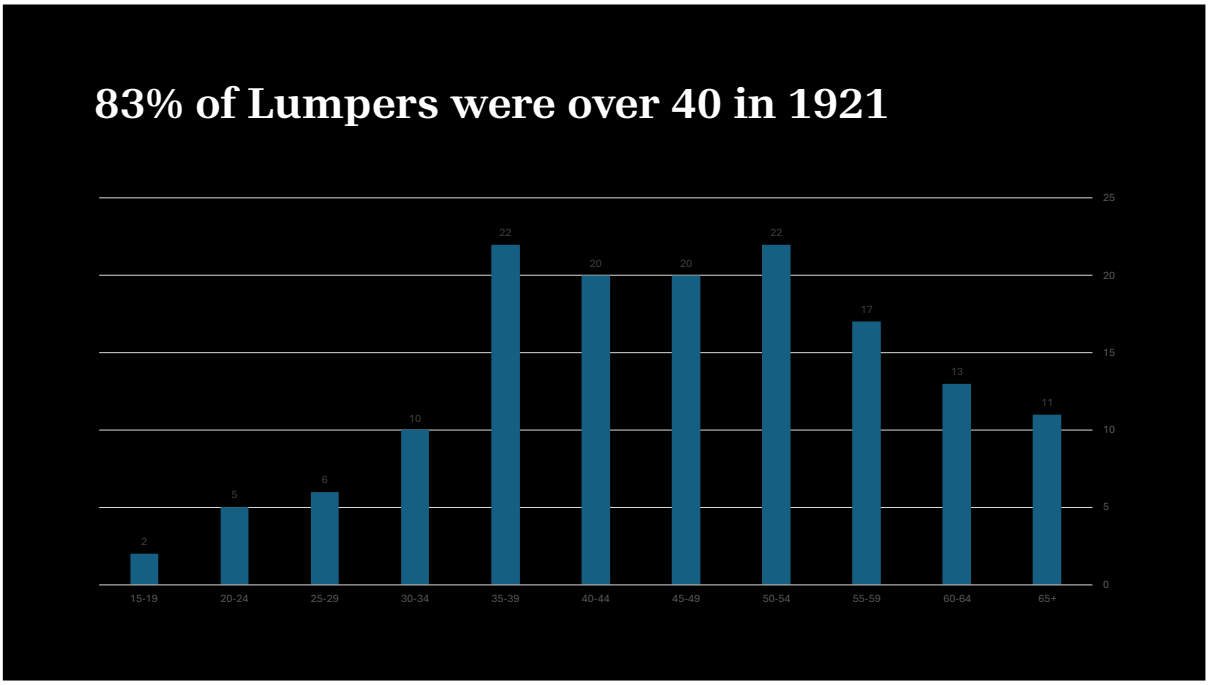


Figure 16: Lumpers' ages in 1921.[25]

[25] Findmypast 1921 census, www.findmypast.co.uk/1921-census.

Figure 17: Lumpers in Royal Avenue Gardens, Dartmouth, in the 1920s.[26]

After the dispute – coaling in Dartmouth, 1922–26

Although the dispute was settled, this had no impact on the work available from ships coming into Dartmouth for coaling or repair, and it remained low in the years following the dispute. The state of Dartmouth's working community was highlighted by an article in the *Torbay Express* in August 1922, headlined: 'Near Starvation – the Plight of Unemployed at Dartmouth'.[27] A Dartmouth representative for the unemployed raised the prospect of 'Starvation in Dartmouth' for 250 unemployed men and their families, many of whom had been out of work for over 18 months, presumably during the lock-out. National benefits were exhausted and the representative therefore approached the Totnes Board of Guardians for relief, and asked the mayor to set up a fund.

Twelve months later, in the autumn of 1923, the situation had worsened further, with 27 ships laid up in the Dart totalling 71,000 tonnes, all part of the 1.7 million tonnes of British shipping laid up at that time. Only 108 ships bunkered that year.

[26] Courtesy of Dartmouth Museum.
[27] *Torbay Express*, 19 August 1922.

Figure 18: Ships laid up on the River Dart in the 1920s.[28]

The country staggered on, but with unemployment rising to unsustainable levels it came to a head in the General Strike of 1926, followed by a coal miners' strike. It was a disaster for Dartmouth.

E&R prospered with the lower operating costs achieved through the lock-out. They built a new head office in 1926 and commissioned a new steam tug: the Portwey in Portland in 1927. Even though the writing was on the wall for coal, there was still good money to be made in the final years of the industry.

[28] Courtesy of Dartmouth Museum.

Figure 19: The Portwey steam tug, commissioned by E&R in 1927, operating in 2024.[29]

Living conditions for Dartmouth workers

The Dartmouth Council had been sitting on Dr Mivart's report into the health and sanitation of the town since 1914. He had highlighted the slum conditions in many parts of the town, but the onset of the First World War meant that the issue was not addressed. In the 1920s, the town sanitation team under Dr Harris, who had contributed to the original report, published annual reports highlighting the overcrowding and awful state of the housing in the rented sector, especially the tenements. Eventually the council were shamed into action and started a programme of buying up the worst houses, demolishing and rebuilding them. St Saviour's Court, Hardy Cottages, and houses and pubs on Higher Street were all knocked down. The council benefitted from government grants to build 26 houses with council employees in 1926, and further up the hill a further 40 houses were built in Townstal Crescent, in 1929–30 letting at 10–13s a week. However, despite the difficult conditions in town, only 30 were let, and the remainder sold to private buyers – perhaps the pull of community was too strong for families to leave the centre of town.

[29] Courtesy of National Historic Ships.

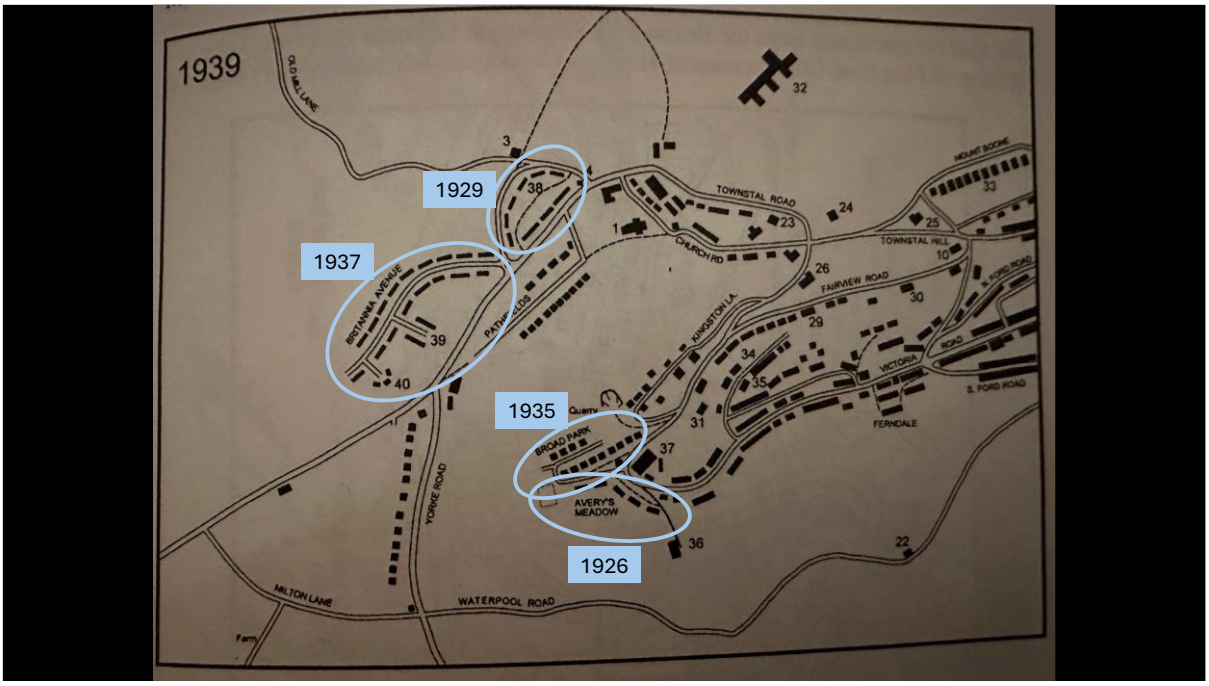


Figure 20: Map of Dartmouth showing new council housing, built away from the town centre.[30]

Other employment opportunities for Dartmothians

Dartmouth's main employers: the coaling companies and Philips shipbuilders at Noss and Sandquay were both working with technology that was outdated, and they were trying to reduce labour utilisation, with the redundancies further exacerbating unemployment in the town. There was little reason for any non-shipping-related industry to come to Dartmouth, and the travel industry was still highly seasonal and focussed on Torbay and Teignmouth, rather than grubby, dirty Dartmouth. So unemployment remained high in Dartmouth when the rest of the country came out of the recession towards the end of the decade.

[30] Eric Preston, *Up the Hill to Townstal: The Growth of Townstal and Higher Dartmouth from 1851 to 2003* (Dartmouth History Research Group, 2005).

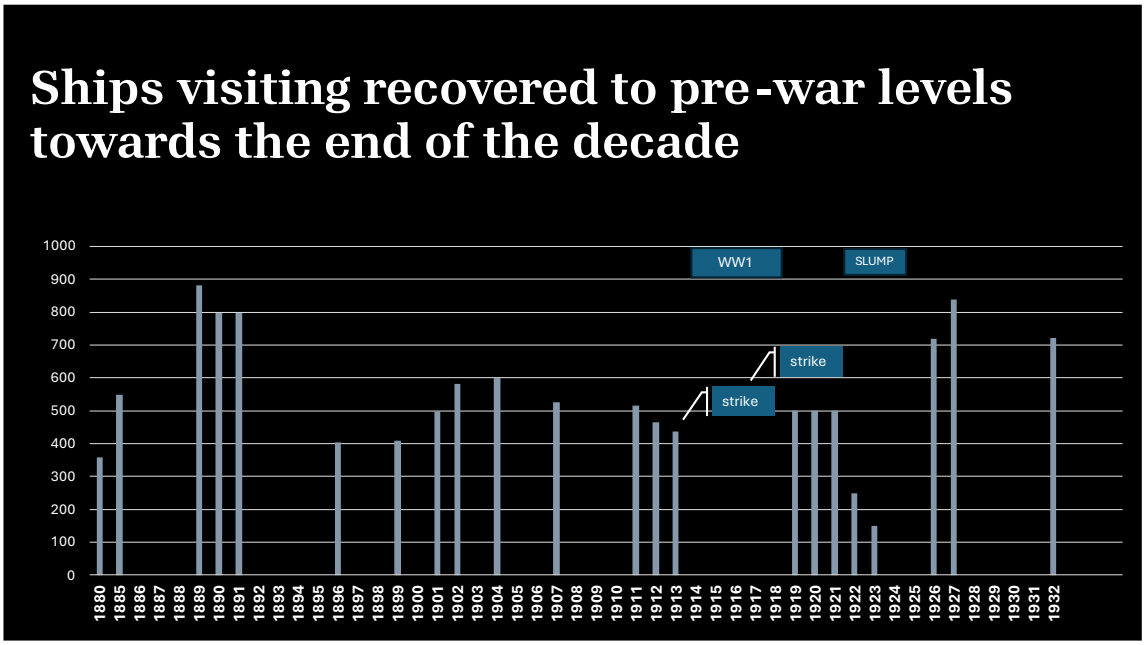


Figure 21: Trade recovery, but bunkering no longer required.[31]

Trade recovered from its 1923 low by 1928, when a record 838 ships visited the port, and would have been serviced by (fewer) lumpers using the new cranes: so unemployment remained high and unresolved, with dockers still accounting for over one-third of unemployment in 1929–30 (see Figure 22).

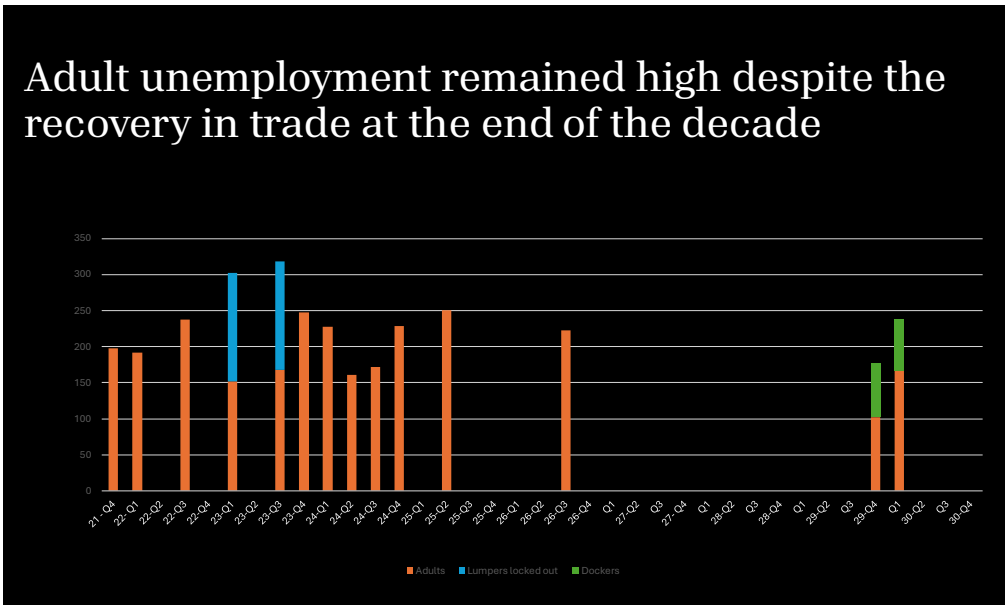


Figure 22: Unemployment levels in Dartmouth, 1929–30.[32]

[31] Author's compilation of data from *Dartmouth Chronicle* and *The Chronicles of Dartmouth.*
[32] Author's compilation of data from *Dartmouth Chronicle* and *The Chronicles of Dartmouth*.

But Dartmouth was battling against the long-term trend to oil-fuelled ships that did not need coal, and larger ships that were too big for the Dart. As a result, the coal bunkering trade dwindled through the 1930s and 1940s. The last ship was refuelled in 1950, and the remaining coal storage hulks were towed away to the braker's yard in 1951.

Conclusion

While the end of coal bunkering meant many fewer jobs in the port for lumpers, it was also the end of a dangerous and unhealthy trade, that rarely paid a living wage. The desperate conditions following the slump in 1923, meant that the council was forced to take responsibility for raising environmental and sanitation standards in the town. This caused the town to expand away from the river and up the hill, sponsoring the growth of Townstal.

The end of bunkering also meant that the town needed to come to terms with the end of its place as a commercial port, and focus more single-mindedly on tourism and leisure. With the end of coal being its principal source of activity and income, the town could present a cleaner and more pleasing face to the world, which became the place familiar to generations of tourists today.