

1863 in Ramsey, Isle of Man – and Why the Stars and Stripes came to town.

Bob Stimpson is the deputy chairman of the Isle of Man Victorian Society, and he spoke to the Society in April 2013 on the history of the Star of India . This article brings together his research into the people living and working in the Ramsey of 1863, together with information on the owner of the ship yard, Thomas Cummins Gibson and the Star's first and commissioning owners, Wakefield Nash and Co. It hopefully explains the mystery of why the Stars and Stripes (or rather, strictly speaking, the US Ensign – probably, at the time, the "boat flag" - of 13 stars and 13 stripes) was flown from the Euterpe as she was launched, almost half a century before she saw US waters and eventually sailed under the American flag, and also the tumultuous events which lead to her being sold on in 1867.

Ramsey shipyard was purchased by Thomas Cummins Gibson in 1838 when it was in a dilapidated and dormant state. Over the following almost 30 years this coal businessman built it up steadily and solidly to become a sound and innovative business. Gibson, who was born in Gateshead, England in 1800, had many interests in the coal industry during the 1840's and 1850's and was in partnership with more than a dozen associates in this time, owning many coal-mines in the Durham and Tyneside region of North-East England. His business partners and contacts included iron merchants and extended down into London and Norfolk in South-East England and as far as Boulogne, France. This large array of active business interests provided the capital and the iron manufacturing contacts to develop his shipyard. Modern references to the Euterpe being made from "Swedish Iron" are not confirmed by earlier newspaper articles of the time, and considering Gibson's very strong commercial ties with the North-East England coal and iron industry make this very likely to be simply a reference to the very low carbon content manufacturing process originally perfected in Sweden, but which was developed everywhere else to varying degrees of success. It is very unlikely the "Swedish Iron" of Euterpe travelled any further than the few hundred miles from smelting works in the Newcastle area to Ramsey via Liverpool, as Gibson did commission other ships earlier to move iron between Liverpool and Ramsey.

During 1863 Gibson launched the iron hulled sailing vessel Jane from his Ramsey yard – the world's first oil tanker. It had been named after his youngest daughter (who later went on to become the first female undergraduate at Girton College, Cambridge). In the early Fall of 1863 Gibson formed the Liverpool and Ramsey Oil Refining and Chemical Works Company. It was reported shortly afterwards in a UK trade magazine that the vessel "Jane" had successfully delivered a cargo of Pennsylvanian crude oil to Ramsey, where it had been decanted into oil storage tanks floating in Ramsey harbour, moored alongside the chemical and bone grinding works Gibson had developed behind his ship yard. (If you were developing one of the very first oil refineries in Britain, you might wonder where breaking news of such key developments would have been published – well "The Grocer" was the leading trade magazine at the time which carried the details of this start to the petrochemical refinery operation in Ramsey!).

Gibson was therefore an established trader with America, listing his occupation in the 1861 British Census as "Manufacturer of Cement and Artificial Manures and Ship Owner". During his business transactions he is recorded as dealing with the Backhouses, a prominent banking family, and this may be connected with his continued prominent use of his middle name "Cummins" to possibly emphasise his connections to the moneyed gentry of the time.

Wakefield, Nash and Co. was a merchant commodity broker and trader of the highest credentials whose daily British cereal prices were published in the New York Times and many other provincial US newspapers. George Henry Wakefield was born in Westmoreland, Kendle, England in 1836, and had entered into partnership with Joseph Gadsden Nash, William Clibbon and Thomas Jackson Fennell.

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Joseph Nash was an Irishman born in Waterford in 1826, who described himself as an “American and East Indian Merchant”. William Clibbon, a commercial clerk, was born in 1837 in Liverpool of Irish parents. Thomas Jackson Fennell described himself as a Corn Merchant and this Irishman had a four-year old daughter at the time of the 1861 census called Alice Deborah, who had been born in the USA.

George Wakefield proudly declared his profession in the census as “American Merchant”, and other records show he was a 6th generation descendant of John Backhouse, the Quaker founder of a banking dynasty which went on to become Barclays.

At the launch of Euterpe in Ramsey on 14th November 1863, the Isle of Man newspaper “Mona’s Isle” (Mona is the Manx name for the Isle) listed the important local guests present at the ceremony but neglected to refer to any members of the commissioning company. The competing newspaper the Manx Sun mentioned in its coverage of the event that “The Strangers Present” were toasted at the celebratory luncheon which took place in the sail-room immediately after the launch. This might have been reference to the representatives or members of Wakefield Nash and Co! The same reports mentioned that the 15,000 square yards of sail canvas has been supplied by Messrs. David Corsar and Son of Arbroath, Scotland. It is possible for this to have been Manx canvas, from the Tromode works of Moore, just north of Douglas, which had been sown into these huge sails and then returned to the island.

Thomas Gibson’s recent trading with Pennsylvania, combined with the strong commercial and family ties of Fennell, Nash and Wakefield to America provide overwhelming reasons why the Stars and Stripes should be flown from the star of the company’s growing fleet – what better way to show the thousands gathering at Ramsey to witness the launch of their greatest vessel to date, than to show the flag of the great nation from far away, which was always in the news?

Surrounding the construction and launch of Euterpe, Ramsey at the time was a vibrant and noisy place to be, with rivet hammers operating almost 12 hours per day. Gibson had published a graphical description of vibrant work and social life in Ramsey in the local paper a few months earlier – no doubt to use as promotional material for the floating of his chemical company, but it provides a picture of a work and play hard force of skilled craftsmen, Manx, Scots, Irish and English all employed by him.

Elsewhere, later newspaper and census records painted a varied picture of life, with some interesting insights into life in this small Manx town. Thomas Killip was a carpenter who become a longstanding Maughold Parish Clerk and member of Ramsey Band, as well as an Official of St Paul’s Church; Foreman Joiner Peter Hevey married 21 year old Isabella Quayle of Maughold, daughter of farmer John; Peter had come over after 1861 and the couple left the island within the decade; the Islands Lieutenant Governor (the resident representative of the Queen and the most senior official on the Island) and his wife Mrs Loch visited Ramsey on the evening on the 31st August. Staying overnight at the Albert Hotel they toured the ship yard early the following morning before departing for local beauty spot Sulby Glen for luncheon.

There were accidents during the construction and fitting out of Euterpe - blacksmith William McKneale was fastening some fittings on to the main yard when a sudden gust of wind caught it and pinned his leg tightly against the mast. He was lowered in excruciating pain to the quay by his workmates where the leg was found to be severely crushed. A Mr Dan Cain of Ramsey, who died in 1928 “suffered infirmity for

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many years” after a serious accident whilst working on the Euterpe – the exact details were not reported.

On 17th November, just days after the launch, Thomas Gibson dissolved the partnership of Gibson McDonald and Co. “by mutual agreement” and formed Gibson Arnold and Co. – Arnold having been present at the launch and mentioned in newspaper reports. On 23rd December Mr Nelson, the shipyard manager who replaced Mr McDonald, imposed reduced piecework labour rates, as used in Liverpool’s covered ship yards, and the Ramsey riveters went on strike, claiming their exposed working conditions were far more severe than those in Liverpool!

This was but a small foretaste of the financial turmoil that was to develop over the next few years, as first Thomas Gibson then Wakefield Nash and Co ran into difficulties. In February 1864 Thomas Gibson sold the yard to George H Wakefield and George P Forwood for £27,775, completing contracts on 16th May 1864. During March of that year, just before Euterpe’s sister ship Erato was about to be launched, reports circulated that the ship yard was about to be extended by the demolition of a row of workmen’s cottages. However, nothing more was heard of this plan. On 3rd August 1864 Thomas announced that he and his family were leaving the island “for up to one year” and in the interim his house had been let to Mr Bennett of the “Isle of Man Ship Building Yard” as his premises were then known as. On 3rd December he sold his interest in the chemical works to William Thompson Dixon and John Baker Edwards.

During January, May and September both he and his wife sold personal effects, part of the Ramsey foreshore and a plot of land to the Corsars, George Wakefield, G Forewood and a Robert Fawcus. On the 20th April 1865 Thomas was declared bankrupt with debts totalling £38,293 and assets totalling £37,306. His unsecured creditors totalled only £3305 of this and he was quickly discharged after paying them 10/- in the £ (50%). He later continued as a corn merchant, eventually dying on 22 December 1870 at Beach House, Hammersmith, London.

Wakefield Nash and Co enjoyed a few successful years after the Euterpe was launched trading with Ceylon and Calcutta in India. They diversified into cotton trading with America at a time when the Civil War made prices unstable and such a storm they would probably had been able to weather had it not been for a tumultuous upheaval which took place in the UK banking system in the late 1860’s. “The Bankers Bank” of Overend and Gurney and Co, who traded in bills and promissory notes and needed a high level of cash deposits, had speculated in the rapidly growing railway stocks market, and then realised they had insufficient cash liquidity to meet demands, which when combined with falling railway stock values caused them to stop payments on 10th May 1866, eventually failing in June 1866. They had a subscribed capital of £5m (\$30-40m at the time) and assets of £1.5m. Unlike in 2007, the Bank of England did not support the failing banks, and Gurney failed; bringing down hundreds of large and small businesses, including other smaller banks, with them. Wakefield Nash and Co were described as having liabilities of £1m with unknown assets, but by 12th July 1866 a “Deed of Arrangement” had been set up and eventually a dividend on the remaining assets was paid on 8th January 1870, the Euterpe having been sold to David Brown of London earlier in 1867.

George Wakefield lived on as a corn merchant, surviving until 1903, where he left a substantial estate of £44,892 17s 5d; Joseph Nash died in cork in 1876 after losing his family home of Cleve Hill in 1873 as a

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bankrupt. Both Thomas Fennell and William Clibbon continued to trade as corn merchants and brokers, with Alice Fennell “emigrating” back to New York in 1887 aboard the “Germanic”.

So the American-born daughter of one of the men who commissioned the Star of India came home to her birthplace after the chaos of a banking collapse, leading where the vessel her father had commissioned would follow 20 years or so later. This is yet another strong link between the Isle of Man and the United States of America; the son of Manx Inventor, Explorer and poet William Kennish, William Jr, supervised the construction of the concrete plinth to the Statue of Liberty, and Kennish senior worked with one of the Founding Fathers of San Diego, David Gray, being on record as selling him a patent for equipment to clear the beds of rivers in the 1850's.

The Manx are immensely proud of producing such a long-living vessel, and grateful to the far-sighted individuals of San Diego for taking her under their wing and restoring the grand old lady close back to perfection. There are clearly many undercurrents of personal and business relationships that lie still undiscovered which will continue to bring our two nations closer together; it gives this particular “honorary Manxman” great satisfaction to know this story is still unfolding...

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