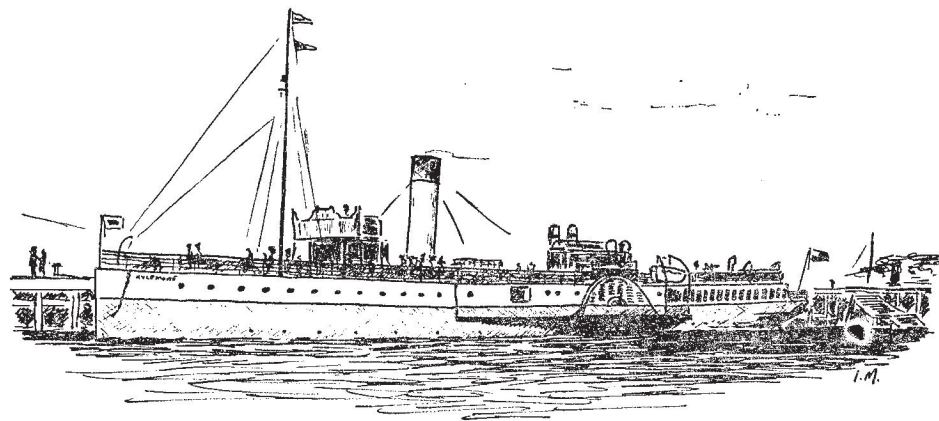


*" Before the town and castle is ane bay of sea, quhilk is a gude  
heavin for ships to ly upon ankers."*

*Description of the Western Isles of Scotland called Hybrides  
by Donald Monro, High Dean of the Isles (1594).*



## CHAPTER I

## THE HERRING PORT

"The Magistrates and Council taking into their serious consideration that in consequence of an unanimous agreement by the former Magistrates for building a new key or harbour for the conveniency and safety of ships and boats, it was resolved that every boat belonging to any person living within the Burgh and territory thereof should be obliged to bring such a quantity of stones as, with those in the old key or harbour, may be sufficient for building the new key or harbour, And that proper applications should be made to the Right Honourable the Earl of Bute and the other heritors in the Island for their assistance in a work so beneficiall to the Burgh, And Considering also that a great many stones have been quarried both at Ascog and Mount Stewart and that several boats belonging to the Earl of Bute's tennants through the Island have been prevailed upon by his Lordship's goodness to bring stones and but a few of the boats in the town and territory have as yet brought any, And that the key or harbour has been lately begun and carryed on as long as there were stones for that purpose which is now stopt through the want of more, chiefly by the neglect of the rest of the boats within the town to perform that duty, Therefore the Magistrates and Council now present Do Enact and Ordain all the owners of boats within the Burgh and territory that have not already brought stones to bring their loadings the first wind and weather serving under the pain of being fined or summarily imprisoned within the Talbooth and ordain these presents to be intimated both publickly and to every owner of a boat deficient in bringing stones." Thus reads the Minute of the Meeting of the Town Council of Rothesay held on 10th June 1752.

Various quays existed at Rothesay prior to 1752, but the stones which were laid down in the 1750s are the first which can truly be said to be the foundation of the harbour which now exists.

From their earliest days the quays were maintained at municipal expense; not by means of the modern form of Rate

but by contributions from those who benefited from the quays, according to their means.

The early quays were of inferior construction and time and the elements ensured their destruction.

Construction of the quay which is referred to in the 1752 Minute was slow and it was not until 1755/56 that an effort was made to finish the quay. A Petition which was presented by the Town Council to the Convention of Royal Burghs in July 1787 records:—

"That this place lay for a long time in a state of the utmost poverty having neither manufactures or trade of any sort except a herring fishing carried on in the firth of Clyde by means of open boats of no greater burden than four or five tons the profits from which were at all times very inconsiderable.

About the year 1756 the people began to entertain an idea that something more beneficial in the way of trade might be done by them; but the want of a pier for sheltering vessels of burden and accommodating that trade stood as a bar in their way. This, however, they resolved to remedy and began building of a quay, although at that time the community had scarcely any revenue even for aid the expense. By contribution from the inhabitants, the assistance of the family of Bute and of other friends, with fifty pounds granted by the convention in 1762 and a debt of £60 contracted and still unpaid, the building of the pier was got accomplished not without a struggle of many years and at an expense of about £1200 Sterling, while at the same time they did other public works mostly by means of private contributions, the aid of the Earl of Bute and others to the extent of about £300 more."

Also about 1756 the Justices of the Peace for the County excused the inhabitants of Bute from performing their Statute work on the high roads of the island for some years on condition they brought stones in their fishing boats to the new quay.

Lack of finance resulted in work on the quay proceeding piecemeal, and it was not until 1781, when the Trustees of the Forfeited Estates made a grant of £425 to the Town, that the quay was completed. Of the £425 obtained, £300 was allocated

by the Council for harbour purposes, and £125 for the erection of a prison and an office for the Town Clerk.

Lack of finance also resulted in the quay being too narrow and having to be widened during the course of its construction. When finished the quay was some 200 yards long and had an average width of 30 feet. The harbour formed by the quay had a depth of water of from 10 to 12 feet at ordinary spring tides. These dimensions are only marginally different from those appearing in the Records of the Convention of Royal Burghs, which, for the 12th of July 1763, state "that the pier is about five hundred and seventy feet in length and the bason which it forms will be twelve feet in depth in ordinary tydes."

A unique volume of maps drawn in 1758/59 belonging to the Marquess of Bute reveals that at that time, where the mid pier now stands, the quay which was then under construction stretched northwards from the foot of Watergate for some 140 yards and then curved eastwards for some 60 yards.

Some idea of the rate of progress on this quay can also be obtained from the Records of the Convention of Royal Burghs, which, for the 6th of July 1756, record that the quay was then only about 100 yards long.

It has already been recorded that in 1752 the Council ordained boat owners to bring in stones for the quay. As an inducement those boat owners who brought in stones were exempted from the harbour or anchorage dues which had been levied on vessels ever since the erection of the very first quay. This state of affairs continued till the 22nd of October 1784 when the Council enacted detailed harbour regulations and reimposed harbour dues to provide funds for maintenance of the quay. The dues enacted ranged from 2d. to 5/-d. Vessels belonging to strangers were to be charged each time they arrived at the quay, but vessels belonging to inhabitants of the Burgh were not to be charged oftener than three times in the space of a year no matter how often they arrived at the quay. Ever watchful of the public purse the Council enacted that no ballast was to be taken away anywhere between Ardbeg and Bogany Points except from the harbour. Penalties for breaking the regulation and charges for exemption from it were intended to ensure the cheap dredging of the harbour.

The endeavours of the Council and the inhabitants of the town to establish a viable herring fishing industry succeeded to such an extent that on the 21st of November 1785 the Council resolved that an additional pier had become absolutely necessary, and that it should be carried out from opposite the foot of the High Street. On the 24th of February 1786 the Council decided that the seaward extremity of the new pier should be turned eastwards towards the end of the existing pier, and that the site of the proposed pier should be staked out. The Town Clerk was also directed to have advertisements for a contractor inserted in Glasgow Newspapers. The following advertisement appeared in the Glasgow Mercury on 9th March:

"An undertaker wanted. The Magistrates and Council of Rothesay in the Island of Bute intend to erect a new pier of about 200 yards long and 25 feet broad for the further improvement of the harbour, persons willing to undertake the executing this work will please to give their proposals without delay to the Magistrates who are ready to point out to them the situation in which the pier is to be carried, the method in which it is to be constructed, and to satisfy as to any other particulars necessary to be known previous to making out estimates. The undertaker will have the privilege of quarrying stones and taking other materials from the town's grounds, where it is believed a good freestone quarry can be obtained."

The advertisements produced two estimates, one of £987 and the other of £980 which were considered on the 15th of June 1786 as was the Council's ability to finance the project. Having £660 either in hand or mostly subscribed for, and being optimistic that more would be procured by subscription, not only in Rothesay but also in Greenock and elsewhere, the Council accepted the lower of the two estimates. The successful contractors were James Orr, James Hoburn and James Grant. The specification for the new pier is detailed in Appendix I.

The Earl of Bute generously agreed to the necessary stone being taken from his lands. A contract was entered into between the parties on the 10th of July 1786. The contract stipulated the work was to be completed by Martinmas 1788.

Subscriptions for the new pier failed to come up to expectation thus compelling the Town Council in July 1787 to

look for assistance yet again to the Convention of Royal Burghs. The Petition, the first part of which has already been quoted, continued:—

"People who are poor and inexperienced must have many difficulties to overcome before they can make any figure in commerce or manufactures. The inhabitants of Rothesay began to build and fit out Busses for the fishery in 1764, but during several years their endeavours were necessarily feeble and the returns small, yet by a steady perseverance they have now become respectable in that trade and contributed greatly by improvements they made to retrieve that knowledge of the fishing business which had been almost lost, and herein the Petitioners flatter themselves, their people have been eminently useful to the country at large . . .

A moderate trade in the herring fishery requires extensive piers or wharfs as generally the whole vessels of the Port are loading or discharging nearly about or at the same time, and in the article of discharging much greater space will be requisite hereafter than was formerly because as the Government bounties, by which they are endeavoured to be nursed towards maturity, are to be partly payable upon the number of barrels of fish taken, the cargoe of many vessels will frequently fall to be all spread out at once in single tires for the purpose of making them as directed by law.

The experience of some years past has shown that the present harbour is not sufficiently capacious to accommodate properly the vessels belonging to the place together with others which are obliged occasionally to take shelter in it, and as the operations to be gone through in consequence of the fishery law lately passed will indispensibly require an extension of room on piers and wharfs the Petitioners formed a resolution to erect a second pier which by contract already made out will stand the Borough £980 Sterling, and this besides a wharf or breastwork which will cost nearly £300 more.

That the revenue of the town does not *communibus annis* produce above £20 Sterling clear after deducting its ordinary establishment, and this small sum is already charged with £60 of debt as has been said. The remainder is barely sufficient to keep the present pier and other public works in repair. By contributions already made about £500 is procured and set

apart for the work, but neither the Corporation nor the individual inhabitants are in a capacity to afford the remainder; and were they to charge the whole or any considerable part of it upon the common good they could not entertain a hope of ever being able to clear it off or to carry on any other public work. They flatter themselves with the expectation that the Convention, from their known disposition to aid Boroughs who are exerting themselves by every means in their power to improve the trade of their country, will afford the Petitioners some assistance upon the present occasion and this they presume the rather as when the £50 was given in 1762 many very respectable Members of the Convention declared that had they foreseen such an application at that time which came upon them in consequence of a petition made several years before they would have agreed to give more."

On the 8th of July 1788 the Convention, which was attended by Provost Peter May and William McLeod Bannatyne, Esquire of Kames, Sheriff Depute of Bute on behalf of the Burgh, granted the Petition by giving the Burgh £400, payable in four yearly instalments.

On the 7th of November 1786 it was reported to the Council by the contractors that they had quarried upwards of 2600 stones at Mountstuart and that they had incurred "a very considerable expense being under the necessity of bringing work people from the mainland at very high wages." It would be interesting to know whether there were insufficient able bodied men available on Bute to undertake the work or whether those there were lacking the requisite skills.

After having received payments totalling £344 the contractors went bankrupt leaving the pier only about one third completed. Work was suspended about the middle of December 1787. Although at first the Council was inclined to institute either court or arbitration proceedings against the contractors on account of their breach of contract, in the end the Council accepted the pier as it had been left and the contractors accepted as their price the £344 they had already been paid.

On the 27th of September 1788 the Council entered into a new contract with Messrs. James and Adam Stevenson and James McKirdy, three Rothesay masons, for the completion of the new quay at a basic price of £750. The new contractors

undertook to start work in the spring of 1789 and complete the quay by Martinmas 1790.

The new quay was completed up to time and although a plan of it does not appear to have survived it is probably reasonably accurate to state that it ran for some 130 yards northwards from the north end of High Street and then eastwards for some 70 yards terminating approximately in line with the straight section of the old quay, that is, opposite Watergate.

It was not long unfortunately before the inadequacy of the specification for the new quay was shown up. Baillie Archibald Muir reported to the Council as early as the 8th of February 1791 that "in a gale of wind which happened lately part of the outer end of the new pier has been beat down and some other parts of it shaken whereas it becomes necessary for the Council to consider what shall be done thereanent." As the quay had not yet been handed over by the contractors the Council felt that they should repair it. The matter was referred to two men of skill who reported that the workmanship of the contractors was up to specification. The same opinion was delivered when the matter was referred to arbitration.

The total cost of completing the new quay was £868.7.9d. which was paid by instalments between 1789 and 1793. The poverty of the Council at this stage in its history is demonstrated by the fact that in February 1791 the Treasurer had insufficient funds to make a payment to the contractors of £100 further to account of the price of the completion work. The Treasurer was authorised to borrow the sum upon the credit of the town or if it be convenient for him to advance it out of his own cash!

It was estimated that £300 to £400 would be required to repair the breach and strengthen the foundations — a sum outwith the reach of the Council. Proper repairs were not executed and it is not therefore surprising that on the 9th of October 1797 Baillie Archibald Moore reported that the new pier had fallen into great disrepair particularly at its junction with the shore and at its northwest corner. The Baillie reported further that several local traders had informed him that not only would they be willing to contribute from their own

resources, but to solicit subscriptions from others towards repairing the breaches. The proposals came to naught and the decrepitude of the quays continued to cause difficulty to mariners.

On the 4th of October 1799 the Council learned " that the trade of this place being almost wholly in the fishing line, great space is occasionally needful to lay out and repack herrings, that only a small number of persons at present engaged in the trade are possessed of closses where they can lay up or pack their herrings, and hence there has been a necessity hitherto for leaving such quantitys of fish on the quays and for there dressing them that the quays are often almost wholly blocked up, yea, that at times those piers are not sufficiently extensive for the purpose, insomuch that it is no uncommon thing to find vessels obliged to wait their turn to repack occasioned solely by want of room."

Not only did the ruinous state of the quays result in insufficient space — it also resulted in lack of shelter in the harbour.

Notwithstanding the formation on 4th October 1799 of a joint committee of Councillors and boat owners and the preparation of plans for the reconstruction of the quays and its financing, again nothing happened.

By March 1803 the inner part of the old quay had also become ruinous and it was accordingly decided that the southmost 90 feet of the old quay should be banked with a facing wall at the north and along its west side and widened to 36 feet. By this time the curved section of the old quay had presumably been completely broken down by the sea. The work was awarded to Messrs. Thomas and Robert Napier who carried out the work between the spring and autumn of 1803 at a price of £144. An extra was 5/-d. " drink money given to the labourers."

Ten years elapsed before the question of the complete reconstruction was again raised. On 11th February 1813 a joint Committee of Councillors and ship owners was formed to investigate the financing of the venture. As before no repairs materialised.