

CHAPTER V

THE PATENT SLIP

A Committee which had been appointed to investigate the advantage, practicability and expense of erecting a breast wall at the head of the east or outer harbour reported back to the Trustees on 28th April 1838 that they considered that their remit should be broadened to include the construction of a Graving and Repairing Slip in conjunction with the proposed breast wall as contemplated by the 1831 Act. In June the Committee recommended that a slip built for graving vessels at the foot of Bishop Street and running outwards by the rocks at the mouth of the harbour (i.e. in a north easterly direction) would be beneficial to the harbour.

The Trustees, unfortunately over optimistically, as events were to prove, thought that the produce of the slip would defray the expense of its erection and upkeep, and would be of great advantage to the shipping interest and the general trade of the town. The Trustees accordingly instructed the Committee to have the harbour and its neighbourhood surveyed to ascertain the most suitable point for the erection of the proposed slip and a building yard to be connected therewith, and the likely cost of the works. The proposal was warmly received by local business interests who went to the length of forming a Committee of their own to assist in the promotion of the venture.

A plan and specification was produced by Mr. Robert Muir of Messrs. Caird and Co., Greenock, and estimates requested from Messrs. Scott and Sinclair and Messrs. John Caird and Co. Subscription papers were issued in order to ascertain how much money might be put up by the public; these produced offers of £318:8:-d.

Doubts then arose as to the suitability of the selected site and also the legality of building in the east harbour. Additional plans were accordingly obtained for what was to be the eventual site of the slip and yard immediately to the west of the west pier, and also for another site on the west side of the bay. The choice was then narrowed down to the east harbour site and the site adjacent to the west pier. Before

coming to a final decision, the Trustees asked the Marquess of Bute whether he would make available a rock outcrop which he owned should the east harbour site be favoured. The Marquess of Bute replied in the affirmative, but drew to the attention of the Trustees that in his opinion a ship building establishment was a very different thing from a graving slip, and that the Trustees did not have Statutory power under the 1831 Act to establish a ship building yard which was a venture for private enterprise. The proprietors of the east bay properties were not over-keen either to see a ship building yard established on their front doorsteps.

Before proceeding further additional technical information was obtained which resulted in the west pier site being chosen, and the market was tested to make sure as far as possible that a tenant would be forthcoming for the slip and yard. Being satisfied on this point — and also being satisfied that the yard was outwith their Statutory powers — the Trustees resolved on 2nd September 1839 to recommend to the Town Council, who had adequate powers, to adopt measures for getting a ship building yard established on the proposed west pier site. The Town Council, not surprisingly, decided to proceed with the venture, the decision being intimated by letter from John Gillies, Town Clerk, to John Gillies, Clerk to the Harbour Trustees.

Final plans and estimates were obtained and thereafter on 28th October 1839 the Trustees authorised the placing of the contract. An estimate by Caird and Co., Greenock for the erection of the wood and iron work of the proposed slip 330 feet long and capable of carrying ships of 300 tons burthen, including iron capstan, wheel purchase, horse gin, etc., for £848, and an estimate by James Kinghorn for the piling and mason work of the slip amounting to £233 were accepted. The filling up of the ground and top dressing of the slip, it was decided, should be carried out by direct labour at an estimated cost of £117.

On 7th October 1840 the slip was tested by the slipping of a Brig belonging to a Mr. Black.

The first tenant of the new Slip and adjacent Building Yard which had office premises, store rooms, a moulding loft, three sawpits, a blacksmith's shop and various working sheds

was Mr. Alexander Black of Rothesay, who offered a rent of 100 guineas per annum for a term of from 10 to 14 years. It was agreed between the Town Council and the Harbour Trustees that the rent would be apportioned between the Council and the Trustees in the proportion of £45 for the slip and the balance for the building yard. At the meeting at which the Trustees let out the slip it was decided that the slip should be enclosed on the south and east sides by a stone wall.

In February 1841 the lessee of the slip reported to the Trustees that there was a deficiency of water for taking heavy vessels on the slip. Technical opinion was that the only way of "remedying the evil" was for the slip to be extended seawards. James Kinghorn offered to build a 70 feet extension for £193 and this was accepted.

The slip and boatyard were not the only matters to receive the attention of the Trustees between 1838 and 1841.

The "necessary" was moved from the west breast to near the angle of the west pier. A cross breast was erected in the corner at the angle of the west pier. Oil lamps were replaced by gas lamps and the harbour was extensively dredged.

This last work entailed the chartering of a dredger which proved to be difficult. Eventually, however, the Trustees were able to secure the use of the Cart Trustees' Paisley dredger for £70 per month and twelve punts and relative equipment for an additional £12 per month. Dredging took place between the end of January and the end of March 1841. Unfortunately the contract terminated in an arbitration on account of the fact that the dredger and punts were returned in a deteriorated condition. The arbiter decided, however, that the Cart Trustees had failed to fulfil all the obligations which were incumbent on them and damages of only £11:10:4d. were awarded against the £40 worth of deterioration.

On 21st February 1842 the Trustees decided that it would be in the interest of the Harbour Trust to let the slip for a term of years from Whitsunday 1842 by public roup. Undaunted by the fact that at the first exposure not a single offerer appeared, the Trustees had a Notice to Quit at Whitsunday 1842 served upon the existing tenants Messrs. Alexander and James Black. Ensuing exposures were no more successful, resulting in the

slip being vacant from Whitsunday 1842 until Whitsunday 1845, when ironically it was relet to Alexander Black at the much reduced rent of £10 per annum.