

Perhaps the smallest port



Dell Quay with one of the last coastal steamers to use the harbour

Kim Leslie from the West Sussex Record Office looks at Chichester Harbour in the days when it was a busy commercial port and in particular, the tiny port of Dell Quay.

'Perhaps the smallest port in England, a house or two, a shed or two, a small jetty.' In these few words Arthur Mee dismisses this tiny place in 1937 in his well-known Sussex volume in the King's England series. Then he would have seen just a few cargo steamers berthing here each year, but not for much longer now, for as a commercial quay it was in terminal decline. And nowadays its chugging steamers and their trade have all but been forgotten, replaced by a backdrop of very different craft, the white sails of the dinghies making the harbour as busy as ever in the summer months.

This 'smallest port' was Dell Quay, just two miles from Chichester. The photograph reproduced here, dating from either the late

1920s or '30s, is one of the very few known to exist showing the quay still in commercial use, a coastal steamer tied alongside as sacks of grain are wheeled onboard.

The old seaman in the other photograph, dated about 1940, is George Haines, a much-loved local character and man of many parts in Chichester Harbour. His family ran the Itchenor boatyard as well as the ferry across to Bosham. One of his vital jobs was acting as harbour pilot, taking commercial sailing craft and steamers up the shallow channel from Itchenor to Dell Quay. Shoals and sandbanks have always made navigation into the harbour mouth and up through the narrow creeks a haphazard business for bigger craft. George knew the channels like the back of his hand. His grandson, also George, has recalled when he was a little boy going up to Dell Quay in the big boats with his grandfather, terrified because of all the bumping and scraping over the harbour bottom as they drew so much water over the shallows. The older George Haines was the last pilot to take cargo steamers up to Dell Quay in the 1930s. These must have been sad days for George as he was seeing the last commercial freight through here, a trade that went back over many centuries.

Early traders must have come this way from time immemorial. Certainly the Romans passed by on their way to Fishbourne, and the Normans building Chichester Cathedral landed their stone from France and elsewhere somewhere along these shores, the

nearest they could come by water to the city itself. Chichester Harbour has been a waterway to history over all these centuries, its long fingers of water inviting invaders and settlers deep into its protective waters.

What we know as Itchenor Reach, leading up to Fishbourne Channel, was once known in 13th-century documents as La Delle, and on Saxton's map of Sussex of 1575 it is called Delle flu, from the Latin *flumen* meaning flow or river. Place-name specialists have suggested that the Dell element might have referred to the slight depression along the channel here that made navigation possible.

For centuries Dell Quay has enjoyed a status out of all proportion to its size. For long it was the main wharf for goods entering and leaving the harbour and at one time was the only one legalised for carrying on foreign trade within what was technically known as the Port of Chichester.

Although an inland city without direct access to the sea - until 1822 when the Chichester Canal was opened from Birdham to the basin at Southgate - Chichester ranked legally as a port since the 1270s. This was when Edward I established a customs service that operated through a dozen or so ports to raise extra revenue for the crown and to cut down on smuggling. In this way Chichester joined a small group of customs ports throughout the country. By 1312 there were only five along the whole of the southern coast: Sandwich, Winchelsea, Chichester, Southampton and Exeter. In 1353 Chichester became a Staple Port, legally empowered to deal in the export of wool, the basis of England's medieval wealth and a carefully controlled commodity. Then over the centuries Chichester saw a wide range of goods pass through the port. Apart from wool some of the main exports were cloth, grain, malt and timber. Wine came in from France, Spain and Portugal, salt from the Bay of Biscay, coal mainly from Newcastle. Much of these cargoes went through Dell Quay, although around the harbour there were a number of licensed creeks authorised to trade. Emsworth became Dell Quay's great rival.

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries the whole harbour buzzed with commercial activity. The port became the leading Sussex exporter of wheat and barley. One famous writer came through these parts in the 1720s, when he wrote of the prosperous grain trade hereabouts. This was Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) whose *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) created one of the most enduring and familiar adventures in English literature.

George Haines, Chichester Harbour Pilot,
in about 1940



As well as a novelist he was a businessman, pamphleteer and government agent, gathering information and testing the political climate to relate back to the politicians. For this he travelled widely, publishing his *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* in three volumes between 1724-6.

With his own background in trade he was always keen to note matters of trade and commerce. He described how grain merchants around the harbour had built large granaries 'near the Crook, where the vessels come up', by which he meant Dell Quay, 'and here they buy and lay up all the corn which the country on that side can spare; and having good mills in the neighbourhood, they grind and dress the corn, and send it to London ... by Long Sea, as they call it', rather than as previously sending it by road to Farnham in Surrey 'the greatest corn-market in England, London excepted'.

The success of the local grain trade through these Dell Quay granaries was closely linked to the numerous corn mills dotted around the harbourside. Reflecting the rich cornlands of the coastal plain, these mills were signs of considerable prosperity, pointing to a golden age in farming during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Other signs of commercial prosperity around the harbour at this time were in the shipbuilding yards at Emsworth and Bosham. At Itchenor a number of small to medium-sized warships and two East Indiamen were built. Not far from here the 3rd Duke of Richmond (1735-1806) had his yachting lodge at Itchenor House. He had his own private dock from which his cargo sloop called *Goodwood* operated. In the Record Office are the master's accounts for operating the sloop in the 1780s and '90s when Goodwood House was being enlarged. Much of the stone for these works came in through his Itchenor dock for onward transit to Goodwood. In 1787 the sloop brought in 144 tons of Swanage stone; other voyages saw her bringing stone and bricks from Plymouth and the huge lengths of pink granite from Guernsey for the decorative columns in the Main Entrance Hall of Goodwood House.

The harbour is full of tales, legends and history so that it is more than appropriate that Dell Quay is now home to Chichester Harbour Conservancy's Education Centre where the story of this wonderful watery environment is told. All is very much alive and well at Dell Quay today, a far cry from the days when George Haines bumped over the harbour with the last of his cargoes sixty to seventy years ago.

Photographs courtesy of West Sussex Record Office, painting by Jill Dickin Schinas. The Record Office is in Orchard Street, Chichester and is open to the public. Tel: 01243 753600

Dell Quay - a busy port in the mid-1850s

