

John Key – Engineer and Shipbuilder

A Genuine Entrepreneur

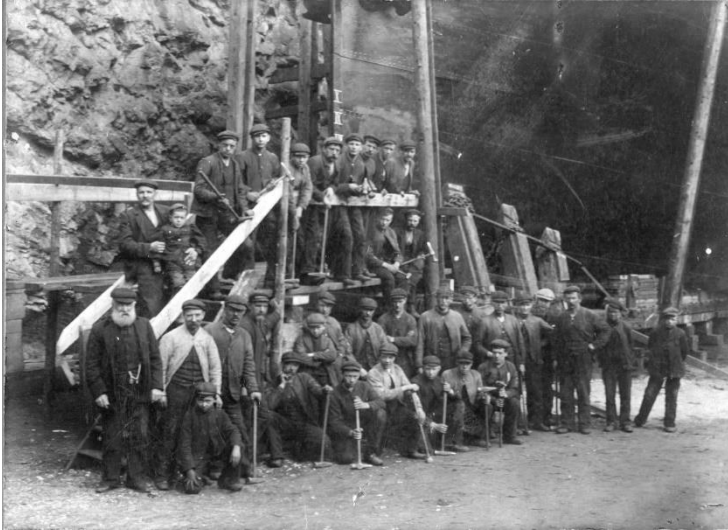


This month we once more feature an object which at the outset of the project was not even under consideration for inclusion. Yet again, it was the result of unrelated research which led us to John Key and the two significant businesses he conceived and created. Put simply, when unearthed, it could not be ignored!

This narrative tells the story of an industrialist who had a major impact on Kirkcaldy and the surrounding area but now is all but forgotten. As far as is known there is nothing to commemorate his achievements – not even a street named after him!

Kirkcaldy was for many decades an industrial town with its attendant noise, smoke and grime, so the existence of the Whitebank Engine Works is no major surprise. What is perhaps more surprising is, when walking towards Kinghorn along the tranquil coastal path enjoying the peace, the seals, the birdsong, the flora and the fauna – that once upon a time it was far different. Instead of silence there was clamour and noise emanating from an unexpected and now long vanished hive of industrial activity.

In today's peaceful surroundings it requires much imagination to picture a large and towering shipyard which



built and launched ocean-going vessels of all types and sizes. That same route, which now forms part of the Fife Coastal Path once sounded to the boots of hundreds of labourers, blacksmiths, ironworkers, platers and riveters, making their daily

journey to build and launch ships.

This is their story and that of the man whose foresight and determination created Whitebank Engine Works and the Abden Shipbuilding Yard.

The name of John Key may not be immediately familiar to readers. He was not Kirkcaldy born but he came to take his place amongst those who found fame on Kirkcaldy's stage. As the *Lang Toun* embraced the industrial revolution, Key was one of the figures driving Kirkcaldy's growing reputation as a manufacturing and engineering base. He rose to become a major employer in Kirkcaldy and also one not averse to risk-taking as can be seen from his diversifying into shipbuilding, especially at a not obviously suitable site.

Rather like Michael Nairn he possibly gave his business so much of himself that he died at the early age of 58 in 1876, although his death notice suggests that he died after a long and lingering illness. That said the story, as it unfolds, will

disclose a committed, driven and focussed man who, when he became an employer, created significant businesses in a relatively short space of time – not just one, but two.

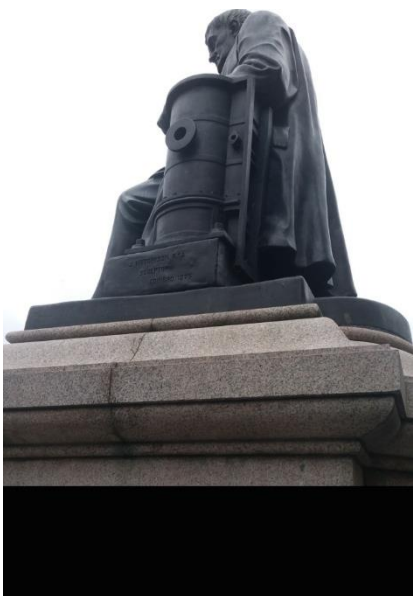
As with so many of Kirkcaldy's important and enduring figures there is nothing tangible to mark his contribution to the town or the wider local area. However, that does not make his story unworthy of recounting as, for over a quarter of a century from 1850 until his death, Key was a major innovative and dynamic player on the industrial landscape.

So, just who was John Key?

John Key was born in October 1819 to John Key and his wife, Janet MacLachlan, close to Meigle in Perthshire. His obituary in the *Fifeshire Advertiser* mentions that up until the age of 15 he was brought up by his grandfather, a farmer and miller, at nearby Camno Mills - but with no further information as to why.

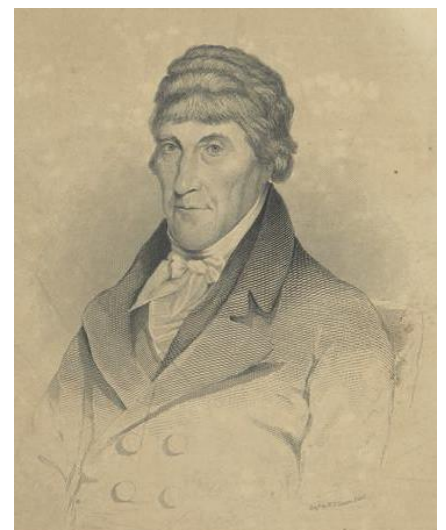
It is suggested that it was the common sight of both lint and meal mills in the immediate neighbourhood that turned young John towards a career in engineering. He was apprenticed as a millwright to James Cameron, at nearby Brig of Crathie, and the apprenticeship gave him a thorough knowledge of the construction of mills. Even at a young age he was both restless and ambitious. He believed that fame and fortune would not be found in this particular industry and that there was ample scope for his energies in a wider field.

To this end, he took the unusual step of re-apprenticing himself as a mechanical engineer with the Dundee firm of *J. & C. Carmichael*. James Carmichael had trained as a millwright and then worked in the spinning mills of Glasgow. In 1810 he joined his brother Charles in setting up the firm which was widely recognised as the pioneering mechanical engineering establishment in the city. Charles had served an apprenticeship as an engineer and, when a partnership he was involved in ended, he encouraged his brother to join him in the new firm. It lasted for well over a century and in its time produced early railway locomotives, the first engines for the Tay Ferries and a great deal of agricultural and mill machinery.



James, in particular, became an important and influential figure in Dundee with his children marrying into the families of wealthy industrialists. In fact, a statue commissioned after his death still stands in Albert Square. It was therefore an ideal place for the ambitious John to serve his apprenticeship and one that brought him to Kirkcaldy for the first time.

Carmichaels were installing a beam engine in the West Bridge Mill and Key was part of the installation team. Aside from the Key aspect, this is an interesting



local anecdote worthy of mention. The mill had been in the possession of the famous Baillie Robert Philp from 1815 until his death in 1829. At that point the mill was purchased by J



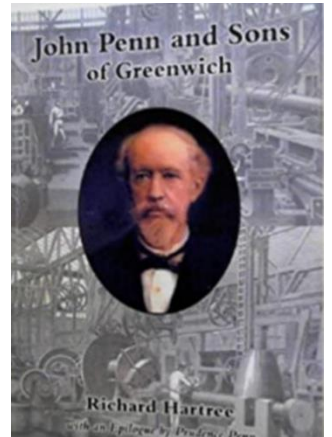
&W Hendry. At the time it was of modest size with only 400 spindles which were driven by a 16 h.p. engine. The new owners gradually increased the number of spindles but still using the same engine! In 1841 the

engine gave up the uneven struggle and the factory was closed for seven months while John Key and his colleagues installed the new more powerful engine and accessories.

This was not the current refurbished West Mill which today stands on the same site. The current building was erected by William Hendry in 1855 and, at that stage, a new larger steam engine was installed. His sons, Daniel and Thomas, operated this new mill for over a decade. In 1866 a spectacular fallout between the brothers saw the mill stand idle for three years. The consequences of this rift caused obvious distress, especially to the workers from the Links where, not unnaturally, most hailed from.

The fitting of this engine seems to have been one of Key's last tasks with *J. & C. Carmichael*. 1841 was the final year of his second apprenticeship and, like so many ambitious men,

in that same year, he made his way to London. He secured a position with *Penn of Greenwich* whose oscillating steam engines were attracting a great deal of interest at the time. John Penn and his firm, *John Penn and Sons*, had been founded by his father, also John, primarily as an agricultural engineering firm. John Penn had a great interest in engines and, when he succeeded to the business on his father's death in 1843, the focus became more on marine engineering. He was an inspired inventor and engineer and had been able to improve the oscillating engine which had been patented by Aaron Manby in 1821.



In 1844 Penn replaced the engines of the Admiralty Yacht, HMS *Black Eagle*, with an oscillating engine which offered double the power with no increase in weight or space required. This feat, on its own, allowed Penn to break what had been a monopoly shared by *Boulton and Watt* along with *Maudslay, Son & Field*, as naval engine suppliers. Due to his innovations in engine and propeller systems his firm became a major supplier of engines to the Royal Navy as it made the transition from sail to steam. It is generally accepted that John Penn was the pre-eminent marine engineer of the mid nineteenth century and at its peak his firm employed over 1,800 workers between its Greenwich and Deptford works.

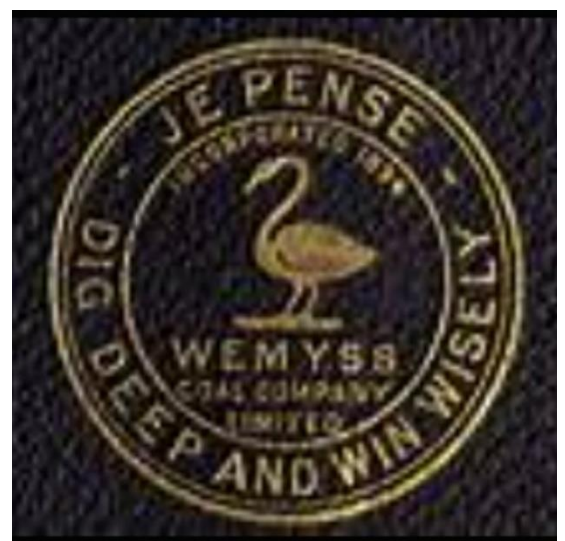
In 1852 the new owners of Brunel's *SS Great Britain* made the decision to replace the original engines with a pair of

smaller, lighter and more modern oscillating engines, which were designed and built by *John Penn and Son*. This was a major coup for the firm as, at the time, and until 1854, the SS *Great Britain* was still the largest ship ever built. While other ships incorporated an iron hull or a screw propeller – this was the first time that both were incorporated into an ocean going vessel. The *Great Britain* was also the first iron-hulled ship to cross the Atlantic, a feat which was achieved in 14 days.

The above is intended to paint a picture of the farsighted, leading, inventive and cutting edge firms, with which John Key had been involved. Without question, their pursuit of improvement, innovation and excellence, rubbed off on him when he became his own master.

In 1845, he came back to Scotland to marry Sarah Whyte in Auchterderran. He returned to London by steamer along with his new wife and the assumption is made that he was still employed by John Penn and Son.

But a change of direction was at hand, as was disclosed by the *Fifeshire Advertiser* of 3rd June 1876. We are told that he met, depending on what you read, either Captain Wemyss of Wemyss Castle, or Rear Admiral James Erskine Wemyss. What is beyond doubt is that one of these



two gentlemen “was so impressed by his shrewd and energetic manner, that he then and there engaged him as the manager of the Wemyss Collieries, a situation he held until 1850”.

Having been employed by two pre-eminent and innovative engineering firms and, assiduously studying their methods, Key now had a further opportunity to expand his skills and knowledge. This came in the shape of David Landale of the Binn (a house close to Burntisland).



Another almost forgotten figure, it is necessary to travel forward to the columns of the *Edinburgh Evening News* of Christmas Day 1895 to learn of Landale’s achievements. That day’s obituary tells us he was born in Newport in 1805 and that “he rose from the ranks of mechanical toilers to a foremost position among the mechanical engineers of Scotland”. Beginning his working life as a mechanical engineer, he subsequently entered the employment of Admiral Wemyss of Wemyss Castle where, “he applied himself to acquire a sound knowledge of the principle of mining



and, by study and application, he came to be recognised as an authority on the geology of Fife”.

Admiral Wemyss had suggested to him “that he should commence business on his own account, in Edinburgh, as a mining and mechanical engineer”. This he did and was soon able to form beneficial contacts in the mining industry in the East of Scotland and through time expanded his business, *Landale, Frew and Gemmell*, into the coalfields of the west of the country. In 1890, such was his standing, that the University of St. Andrews conferred upon him an honorary degree for his services to mining and geology.

We gather a little more information on this remarkable self-made man when we examine the *Fife Free Press* of the 2nd August 1884. A lengthy article covers the wedding, the previous Monday, of Randolph Gordon Erskine Wemyss and Lady Lillian Mary Paulet. The local area was in celebratory mood and “During the afternoon a heavy cartload of provisions, &c., left the castle for the neighbouring villages for the purpose of delivering good cheer to the deserving poor”. Among the celebrations there was also a banquet held in the library of the castle for the tenants living on the Estate. As was the custom on these occasions there were speeches and toasts, numerous in numbers! David Landale was the recipient of fine words from Charles Carlow of the *Fife Coal Company* during his toast to the *Professionals on the Estate*.

We learn that Landale had been connected with the Wemyss Estate as its engineer for close to 50 years. He had continued to provide services to the Wemyss family even after he struck out on his own. It is obvious from the remarks in this article, and his obituary, that Landale was highly regarded for his technical knowledge, engineering skills and inventive mind, throughout the mining areas of Scotland. It became clear that it was in 1845 that Landale set up on his own account and was replaced in many of his responsibilities by John Key. Given that Key would at times rub shoulders with, and have the benefit of, Landale's knowledge and advice – this could only have stood him in good stead for the future. Landale is given a significant share of the credit for the innovations that led to the Wemyss Collieries producing one quarter of Fife's coal output – somewhere between 500,000 and 600,000 tons each year.

We have to return to Key's obituary in the *Fifeshire Advertiser* of the 2nd June 1876 to start to gather information together on him. It relates that by 1850:-

“He considered that he had long enough acted as servant, and determined to set out as master and so, scarcely six and twenty years ago, without capital and without influence, he

THE LATE MR JOHN KEY.

As briefly noticed in our last, Mr John Key, engineer and shipbuilder, died on 26th ult. at the comparatively early age of 56; and as his career has been one of no ordinary success, and as he has so long been identified with the interests of the district, the community who have to deplore his loss may be interested in knowing somewhat of his life.

began business in Kirkcaldy, his working establishment, in the first place, consisting of himself and one other man.

“But he was equipped with a far surer talisman of success – experience, unwearying perseverance, faith in himself, a fearless and honest heart, and an honourable ambition: and under the influence and direction of these, he extended and developed his trade to such an extent that it has given employment to as many as 700 men and boys at one time.

“The confidence in himself inspired confidence in others and almost at once he got into some considerable business, the late Mr John Duff*, Pathhead, having ordered an engine from him the first year he commenced business, followed, and not long afterwards, by an order for another from Mr Normand of Dysart+”.

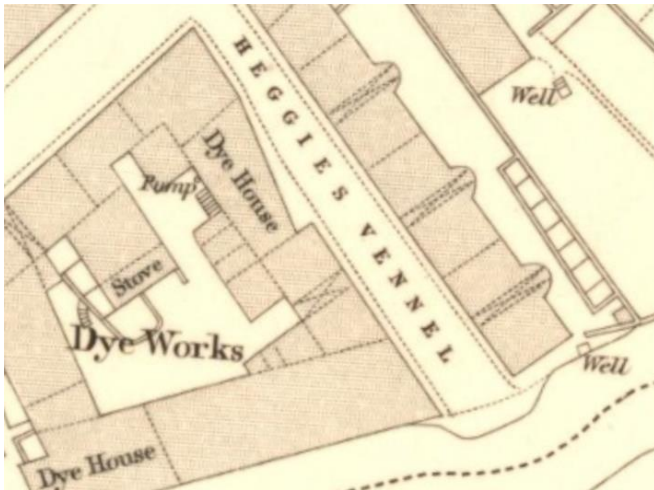
*The John Duff mentioned above, as far as can be ascertained, was a merchant from Nether Street, who lived in a seven bedroomed house with his wife and a servant.

+James Normand was involved in both weaving and spinning and was also Provost of Dysart for a lengthy spell from 1852-1870.

Key’s business name was *White Bank Engine Works*, but almost from the off that created issues with the spelling. As he had married a Sarah Whyte – it was sometimes referred to as Whyte Bank Engine Works. At other times there was no separation of White/Whyte and Bank – it was simply written

as one word. This issue was duplicated when he built White/Whytebank house for himself and his family.

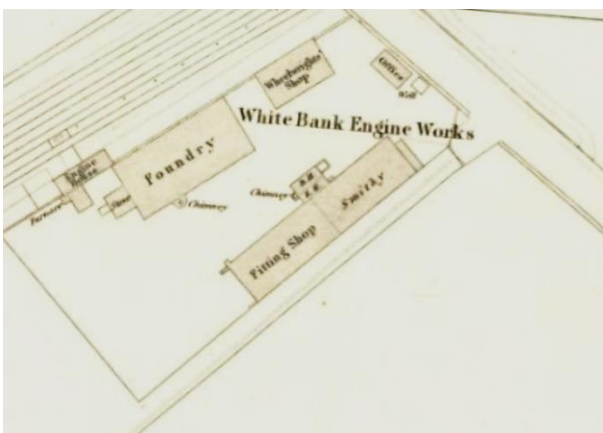
Data is rather scarce on the first premises of the firm. What is



beyond doubt is that it was situated at the foot of Heggie's Wynd. It is equally certain that the business was initially an engineering works specialising in industrial engines and pumps but, in time, it began to specialise in

marine engines. The late, Duncan Glen, in his excellent *Illustrious Fife*, published in 1998, asserts that contracts were won for the supply of engines from both the British and French governments. **Confirmation** of this was found in a *Dunfermline Saturday Press* dated 28th July 1866.

When the 1855 Ordnance Survey map is consulted we find



the premises now situated just off Dunnikier Road. The map discloses that the works stood in isolation although in time they were purchased by and incorporated into the furniture manufacturing works of A.H. McIntosh.

Key had exactly the same foresight as McIntosh in choosing that particular area for his engine works – it was adjacent to

the main railway line and also had the added benefit of a branch line running directly to the harbour – which made for easier transportation. Records do not disclose if both Heggie’s Wynd and Dunnikier Road operated in tandem or if the original works simply closed.

The Fifeshire Journal of the 4th September 1853 reports on an activity which many firms dealing in brass and iron would be familiar with. The article tells of one John Henderson, from Kirkcaldy, being sentenced to 21 days in prison for stealing copper studs/ bolts from Whitebank Engine Works on the 1st August.

While we cannot be precise about Key’s activities at the outset of his self-employment, we can at least see evidence that his enterprise quickly gathered pace. We do not apologise for including a lengthy newspaper article from 1860. The prime reason for its inclusion is in the mention of John Key – but the article provides a snapshot of Kirkcaldy’s growing industrial might which has now dissipated and almost vanished:-

“The Town’s Progression - During the last ten years the Lang Toun o’ Kirkcaldy has undergone many changes, and almost in every case for the better. A little before 1850 the town suffered severely by the failure of one of our largest employers, when the artisans were scattered to the four corners of the earth. This was a sad blow, but reverses are sometimes the precursors of progression; and in Kirkcaldy

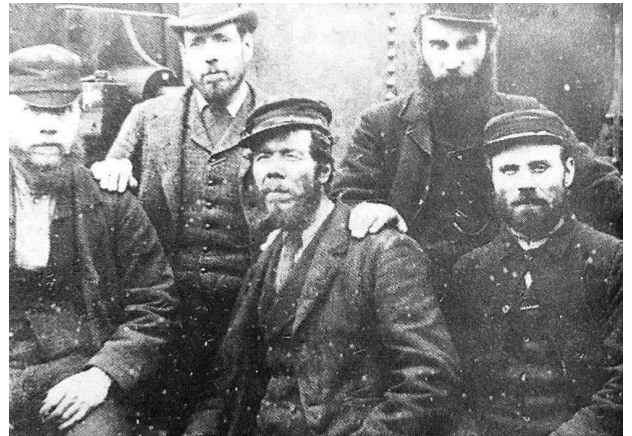
this has been the case. Between that eventful period and this many public works have been added to the town and others have been greatly extended.

For instance, we have got amongst us Mr Douglas of the Dunnikier Foundry, who employs about 150 men; **then there is Mr Key of the Whitebank Engine works, who employs about the same number**; Mr Schafell has started a power loom factory; Mr Smith a brass foundry; Mr Bryce a boiler works; and in this direction there is Mr Landale, who has made great extensions to his works.

If we now go into the heart of the town, we find that the Messrs Brown have done something by extending their premises; then almost next door there is Mr N. Lockhart, who has established a branch of trade quite new to the town, in the shape of a net factory, and to which lately he has coupled engine making. Next on the roll is the Messrs Lockhart of the Links, who have erected a large factory in Burleigh Street; almost opposite we find the factory of Messrs Wemyss, where the quantity of weaved goods annually sent off from this establishment is very large. In a short time we will have another power loom factory started at Balsusney, the proprietor of which is Robert Jeffrey Esq., one of the most enterprising gentlemen of this town. In addition to all these there has been another addition to the trade of the district, of sail making”.

The article went on to speak about retail and commercial premises but it is hard evidence that, in a ten year period, John Key had gone from employing 5 men to 150 – an impressive feat by any measurement.

Fife Today, through its journalist Paul McCabe, carried an article on John Key in 2019. The item included a photograph of 5 workers, courtesy of Fife Cultural Trust, and mentions that Key commenced business with “two



other tradesmen and three labourers”. The question is, are these the five individuals mentioned above, or is John Key himself in the group? As always we hope that a reader may recognise a relative.

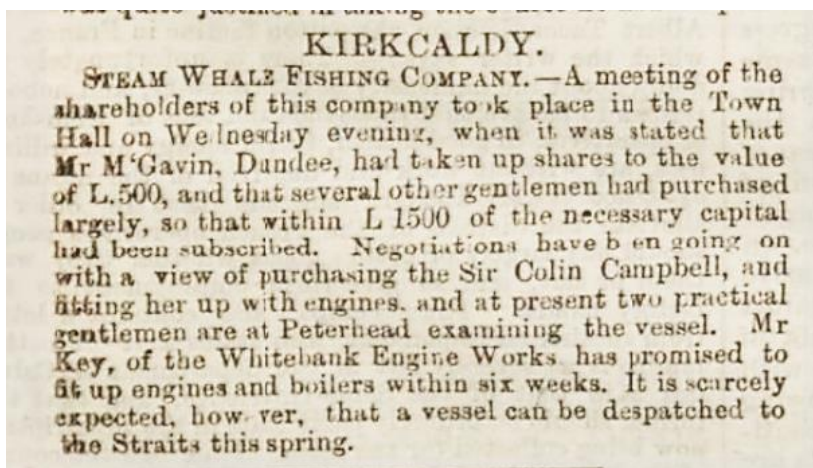
The move into marine engines is borne out by an article in *The Dundee Advertiser* of the 3rd June 1862 which discloses that the Steamship, *City of Paris*, which had been built in Sunderland, had arrived in Kirkcaldy some weeks previously. It was John Key who had won the contract to fit the engine and boilers and, the day before, steam had been raised on her for the first time. A sea trial was scheduled for later that week before she would leave for her home port.

The Dundee, Perth and Cupar Advertiser, of the 27th June 1862 disclosed that John Key of the Whitebank Engine Works had completed adding the engine and boilers to the French

steamship – *The Seine et Tamise*. The ship had left for its destination and was the third ship from this particular builder which Key had fitted out. While we have secured the names of two of the ships – the third remains unknown at this stage.

John Key was involved in discussions with a group intending

to set up the *Steam Whale Fishing Company* as reported by the *Dunfermline Press* in their edition of the 27th December 1862. There had been several meetings held



in Kirkcaldy Town House and the shares purchased to date had left the company only £1,500 short of the sum required to install engines and other apparatus on the *Sir Colin Campbell*. That ship, which was currently lying in Peterhead harbour, was considered ideal for the purpose. John Key had indicated that he could fit up the engines etc., for circa £10,000. He suggested the work could be done in time for the next year's fishing. It would appear that this idea failed to progress. Firstly, the last Kirkcaldy whaler, *The Brilliant*, was withdrawn from service in 1866 and the *Sir Colin Campbell* was sold to Portuguese owners that same year. By 1866, after 53 years, whaling was no more in Kirkcaldy.

However, if we can briefly move forward to 1868, and in particular to the *Fife Herald* of the 5th March, we find

ment. The River Tay, the first iron steam vessel built specially for the whaling trade, was launched by Mr Key the other day. The vessel is the property of Messrs Gilroy Brothers & Co., Dundee,

John Key involved with a whaling ship. *The River Tay* is being constructed at Kinghorn and that she is the first iron steam vessel built specifically for the whaling trade. The order was given by *Gilroy Brothers & Co* of Dundee. The article mentions that the ship is divided into six watertight compartments and has extra strong iron in the hull to withstand the pressures of the ice.

However, during the launch she came in contact with the rocky shore and was damaged with her stern twisted and the keel broken. The report intimates that she was towed to Dundee for repairs.

Things got no better as, despite the watertight compartments and strengthened hull, on the 17th August of the same year she floundered off Baffin Island after springing leaks. The crew had to be evacuated and dispersed over other ships.

THE PROPOSED SHIP-BUILDING YARD AT KIRK-CALDY.—The negotiations which have been going on for some time past between Mr Key of the White Bank Engine Works, and the Kirkcaldy Harbour Commission, in reference to the proposed lease of the ground at the back of the West Pier, belonging to the Commission, for a ship-building yard, to be laid down by Mr Key, have not been satisfactorily arranged. We understand that Mr Key has secured another stance for the purpose contemplated on the property of the Earl of Rosslyn. The place fixed upon is a field on the east side of Tyrie Bleachfield, between the Glass Rock and the Long Craigs.

Moving backwards in time the first inkling that John Key was considering/had decided to embark on building ships, not just the engines and boilers, springs

from an item which appeared in March of 1863.

The Caledonian Mercury of the 7th March 1863 brought the news that Mr Key's proposed shipbuilding yard would not after all be sited at Kirkcaldy Harbour. There had been no agreement reached in relation to a proposed lease of ground to the rear of the West Pier. It now transpired that the new site could well be on ground owned by the Earl of Rosslyn, just to the east of Tyrie Bleachfield, between the Glass Rock and Long Craigs.

In fact, neither of the above sites came to fruition and we find that the eventual site was just to the north east of Kinghorn Parish Church. It was contained in a site bordered by the railway line to the north, the sea to the south, and its western boundary was the meeting point with the Kinghorn Parish boundary. The ground was sold to John Key by the trustees of the late Robert Stocks of Abden. The transaction must have taken place in the early part of 1863 and certainly before August as the following paragraphs disclose.

The Daily Review (Edinburgh) of the 19th August 1863 contains a report that a large steamer, built in Sunderland by James Laing, for Mr Key of the *White Bank Engine Works*, has arrived at Kirkcaldy Harbour to have its engines installed. The engines are the same as those displayed at the exhibition* the previous year. In terms of the new shipbuilding yard, which is currently under construction at Kinghorn, good progress is being made and it is hoped to have the first keel

laid down in a matter of weeks. It is also understood that further orders can be expected shortly, with the venture hoping to employ several hundred workers, which will be of immediate benefit to the traders in the town. The same newspaper in its 10th September edition reveals that these engines are now fitted and the ship has undergone her sea trials. Large crowds had gathered on both the pier and the Sands Road to watch the ship start on its run, under light steam, to Granton. The ship was named the Wo-Kee and was sold to a London ship-owner to trade between China and Japan. Given that no shipbuilding was involved, the assumption must be that the engines were manufactured and fitted in Kirkcaldy with no Kinghorn involvement.

TRIAL OF THE WO-KEE.—For some weeks past this fine vessel, built at Sunderland by Mr Laing for Mr John Keay of Kirkcaldy, has been lying in the harbour for the purpose of being fitted up with the engines, which were exhibited by Mr Key at last year's International Exhibition, and on Wednesday her trial trip took place. There was a large assemblage of people on the pier and along the sands promenade watching the movements of the vessel. After clearing the harbour she ran up to Granton under easy steam. Her length over all is 185 feet by 26 feet broad, and 15 feet deep. Her engines are direct acting horizontal of eighty horse power, and during the run she made 10½ knots in 35 minutes, with 86 revolutions a minute. Built expressly to trade between China and Japan, the Wo-kee is fitted up with every necessary accommodation for passengers. Her saloon is on deck, and the sleeping berths are capable of accommodating 40 first-class passengers. She has been classed 9 years A 1 at Lloyd's; and we understand she has been disposed of by Mr Key to Messrs George Duncan & Co., of London. Her trial gave the utmost satisfaction; and in the afternoon she steamed down the Firth for Sunderland, where she is to be finished before setting sail to China. She was under the command of Mr Croft.

More information was available from the *Dundee Advertiser* of the 11th September 1863. The ship had been built for John Key as a speculative purchase. He had then fitted the engines

and successfully sold the ship to a G. Duncan & Co., London. The ship left for Sunderland captained by a Mr Croft.

International Exhibition



1862 International Exhibition,
South Kensington

*The mention of an exhibition taking place led us to the 1862 Great Exhibition which was held in South Kensington, London. The event which ran from the 1st May until the 1st November attracted 28,000 exhibitors from 36 countries with over 6 million visitors attending. Designed to showcase the advances in the 10 years since the previous exhibition, highlights included – submarine cables, the electric telegraph, parkesine (the first plastic named after its inventor Alfred Parkes) and especially a prototype refrigerator which could make ice!

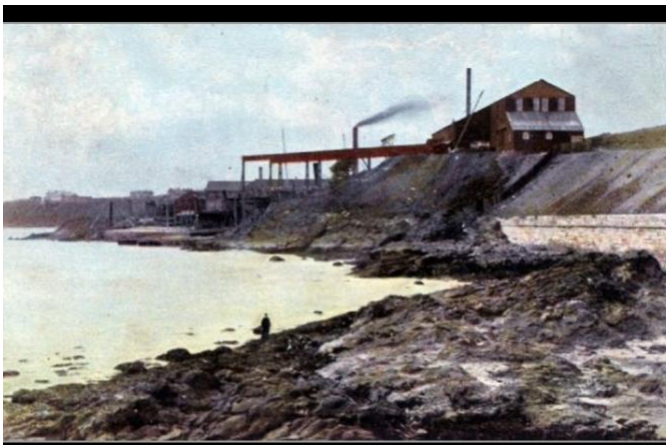
John Key had a place amongst the engineering section Class VIII and the catalogue information advises the following:-

1897. Key, John White Bank Kirkcaldy – Horizontal direct acting screw engine of the collective power of 80 horses. The exhibitor is a designer and manufacturer of horizontal direct acting screw engines, of oscillating paddle wheel steam engines, boilers etc. etc. Prices and other particulars may be learned by application.

One of the major benefits anticipated from the shipyard's opening was apparent from an article in the *Fife Herald* on the 27th August 1863. "A large and influential meeting had been held in the Kinghorn Town Hall the previous Friday. The purpose was taking steps to organise a building society for the erection of houses suitable for the working classes". John Key himself attended and revealed that the yard, currently in the course of construction, should offer

employment to 500 workers. He believed that demand for this type of housing would be substantial. It was agreed that shares with a face value of £1 would be issued “with no member being allowed to hold more than 20 shares, thereby keeping the movement within reach of the working classes”. A Henry Dairnie was appointed clerk/treasurer and William Robertson the honorary secretary. The article concluded with its understanding that already 700 shares had been taken up.

There can be no doubt that the advent of the shipyard was a huge boost for what had been a depressed town. A boon to the shops and the anticipated repair/refurbishment of derelict or semi-derelict houses was a major benefit. John Key’s 1876 obituary goes as far as “A new era of prosperity dawned for Kinghorn, which had been for some time previous been in a drooping and languid state”.



The *Fifeshire Journal*, also of the 27th August, carried the above syndicated report but went a little further in giving some details of the yard itself. With the strapline **Iron Ship-Building** the article reported that:- “A

new branch of industry – namely the building of iron ships – is about to be introduced at Kinghorn on a somewhat extensive scale. Through the enterprise of Mr Key, Engineer, Kirkcaldy, a large shipbuilding yard with workshops is in the

course of construction at Abden, immediately to the east of the village. The yard is situated on a partly natural and partly constructed slope, falling nearly eastward, and in an oblique direction the lie of the ground being inshore rather than seawards. About 200 feet of sea frontage is obtained at the bottom of the incline; on the left hand is a steep wooded bank, about 80 feet of which has been cut away in forming the building slip; and on the right is a rocky beach, a considerable part of which has been covered by banking out. To obtain the requisite superficies a great body of material has been laid down and the embankment is protected by a strong sea wall. A hollow between two of the abrupt ledges of rock that lie across the beach at this point form a convenient basin for floating timber and on the high grounds on the other side there is a siding of the railway which runs immediately alongside”.

It therefore meant the provision of a direct rail link from White Bank Engine Works in Kirkcaldy to the new yard. The article indicates that the building yard is 480 feet long with a breadth of 280 feet. The site is believed capable of accommodating four vessels of 1000 tons each.

“At the head of the slip are the workshops. They consist of a double building, one side of which is a single story for the blacksmith’s shop, 220 feet by 38 feet; and the other side is in two storeys, 220 feet by 40 feet – the lower being the machine-shed and the upper the moulding loft. At the inner

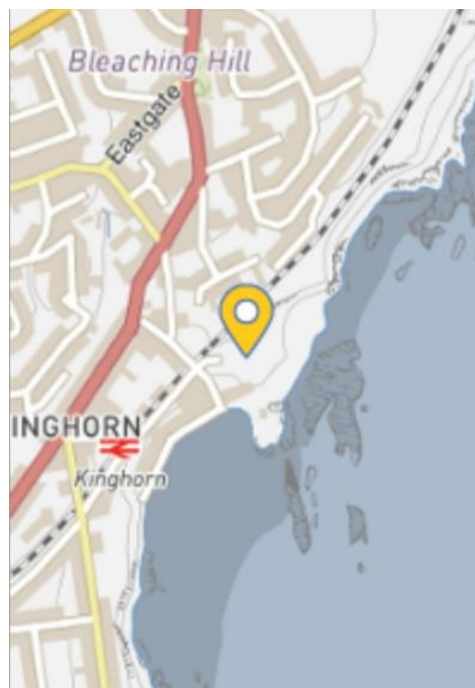
end of the workshops are the engine and boiler houses from which a stalk [chimney] rises to a height of 120 feet. The yard will employ, it is expected, 300 men when the work is fairly started. At present the builders are still busy in erecting the workshops and labourers in laying out the building yard”.

Key's initial methods of construction can be deduced from an item contained in the *Dundee Advertiser* of the 12th April 1863. On Monday the 10th the Harbour Commissioners of the Town Council had held a meeting with Provost Swan in the chair. One of the items was a letter from John Key requesting that a berth be made available, in the harbour basin, in order to put boilers and engines into a new vessel. The request was granted subject to the normal harbour regulations. We can conclude that the *modus operandi* was to construct and launch vessels at Kinghorn then tow them to Kirkcaldy/Leith to add their power plant and complete the fitting out.

Vessel construction itself was not far behind as was disclosed by *The Dundee Advertiser* of the 11th September 1863 which indicated that the keel of a large iron screw-steamer of 800 tons had indeed been laid at the new shipyard under construction at Kinghorn. It was designed to carry 220 1st and 2nd class passengers and was propelled by a 1,000 horse power engine. This almost certainly has to be the *South Australian*. There are also orders in hand for three further vessels – all for the passenger trade. One order was from London and two from Australia. We learn that the yard can

deal with four builds at any one time and that a great quantity of wrought iron and wood has arrived from Newcastle and Dundee to be used in the construction.

Something a tad different was the subject of a report in the *Fife Herald* of the 28th January 1864. Labourers working with John Key had been involved in removing a banking and came upon an earthenware jar which would take around two gallons. It contained around 12,000 silver coins with the latest date of 1375. They were mostly from the reigns of the Edwards but included some from the times of Alexander III, John Baliol, Robert the Bruce and David II.



With a significant amount of searching the first launch from the yard was unearthed in the *Caledonian Mercury* of the 8th April 1864. Some details provided are that the event took place “in the presence of several thousand spectators including many of the leading gentry of the neighbourhood”. The vessel was described as 222 feet in length and her weight was 759 tons. The ship had been built and classed as meeting Lloyd’s Nine Year Standard A1. She was launched by Miss Key and had a “handsome fitted salon 66 feet long for 40 first class passengers”. She could also carry 130 2nd class passengers.

The article ended by noting “another large screw steam-vessel, at present on the stocks, is in an advanced stage and will be launched shortly”.

An item in *The Dunfermline Saturday Press* of the 14th May 1864 relates to the completion of the vessel under a strapline:- “The South Australian.****

This fine new vessel recently launched from the Kinghorn yard of John Key and which has been lying in Kirkcaldy harbour for some weeks in order to be fitted up with boiler and engines left the harbour on Saturday afternoon last. Her run from Kirkcaldy to Granton, where she now lies to have her compass adjusted, gave the utmost satisfaction, her speed realised the expectations of her owners and builder. She is propelled by a pair of 180 horsepower oscillating geared steam engine”.

The wonders of the internet took us to *Trove* which is a web-based collection of articles from Australian universities, libraries and newspaper records. There we located an item carried by the *South Australian Register* on the 13th April 1867 – “*The Alabama* brings news of the total loss of the steam ship *South Australian* on Coal Point, Molyneux Bay, four hours after leaving Port Chalmers. The crew and passengers were saved – she was insured for £20,000 in colonial offices”.

The 24th April 1864 saw the *Fifeshire Journal* report on the death by drowning of David MacKay – employed by John Key.

MacKay had been bathing with a companion on the shore adjoining the works when he got into difficulties. His companion attempted a rescue but a wave separated them. The body was recovered half an hour after the incident.

The Fife Herald reported on the launch of an iron screw steamer on the 17th August. The paper noted that “the appearance of the vessel on the water exceeds anything we have yet seen, and it is questionable whether a more model looking craft has ever traversed the deep. The ship was towed to Kirkcaldy harbour for finishing. Again some diligent research found further details in the *Daily Review (Edinburgh)* when it was published on the 18th August. The ship was a brig-rigged iron screw steamer of 220 feet in length and said to be 680 tons in weight. She had been built to the standards of a Lloyd’s special Survey and was destined for the China trade. She was named the *Princess Helena* by Miss Stocks of Abden during the launch.

The 3rd October 1864 saw a very unsavoury incident being the subject of an article in the *Dundee Courier* under the Kinghorn news. “It is currently reported that a most flagrant, and, in the circumstances, particularly base attempt to deforce a respectable married woman, the wife of one of the workmen in Mr Key’s shipyard was made in the early part of the week, by a fellow workman who immediately



thereafter absconded". The police were searching for the culprit.

The *Dundee Advertiser* reports on the launch of a ship in its edition of the 14th April 1865. The launch had drawn a huge crowd from Kirkcaldy, Kinghorn and Burntisland.

The vessel, weighing 800 tons, was 226 feet long, 27 feet broad, with a hold 17 feet deep. The ship was launched by John Key's daughter and was named *Alexander III*. After launch the ship was towed into Kirkcaldy to have her engines and boiler fitted. The report mentioned that the *Alexander III* "has a salon on deck for 1st class passengers, upwards on 60 feet long, which is elegantly fitted up with all the luxuries and conveniences becoming a first class passenger ship. Also on the stocks was a large paddle steamer at an advanced stage which will be ready for launching in the course of a few weeks. In connection with this shipbuilding yard a powerful crane is in the course of construction in order that vessels may be fitted up with engines and boiler prior to leaving the stocks". (It does seem that not every ship had its engines/boilers fitted at Abden).

The above is however proof that everything in a newspaper should not be taken as factual. The *Alexander III* was renamed the *Nippon* when it was bought by the P & O Steamship Company in July 1865. This suggests that the build had been speculative. It probably had as much luck as

Alexander III himself when in January 1868; it broke in two after hitting a reef 25 nautical miles south of Amoy.

The paddle steamer mentioned is an interesting story in itself. It was ordered by Crenshaw & Co. of Liverpool. It was intended to be a blockade runner for use in the U.S. Civil War. Ordered too late for action it was sold before completion. Launched on the 6th September 1865, by John Key's daughter, and watched by over 3,000 spectators. It had been the intention of the original owners to name her *Great Northern* but she was launched as *Judge King*. Completed in March of the following year and registered by the *Liverpool and Dublin Steamship Company*, she arrived at Liverpool in March 1866 and two months later ran aground on a sandbank off Southport. The 300 passengers were taken off but 200 cattle remained on board until she was re-floated the following day. The ship was then sold in 1867 and renamed *The Marquis of Abercorn*. That did not bring the vessel much luck! In June 1869, while leaving Dublin for Glasgow, it was hit amidships by the *Lord Gough* close to Belfast Lough – the ship was lost and while the passengers and crew were saved – 200 cattle were drowned.

The Fife Herald in its edition of the 18th May 1865 reported an unfortunate accident at Kirkcaldy harbour. "The *Kinghorn*, a screw steamer, the workmanship of John Key, Ironsideshipbuilder, Kinghorn, was leaving the harbour for Granton when a wire rope connected with the rigging of the

vessel caught hold of the large shears or crane erected on the pier, also the property of Mr Key, and before the steam-tug could be stopped the huge machinery fell down with a terrible crash barely allowing time for a number of workmen employed about the ship to escape. The damage to the shears is said to be about £100”.

The ship made for Granton and despite the wind not being favourable she made almost 13 knots per hour in her first trial. We believe that this ship had a change of name and investigations continue.

More evidence to support the view that the firm still built ships not just to order but speculatively was provided by a vessel which was launched on the 29th August 1867 and named the *Sultana*. However, before she had been fitted out, she was purchased by one of the most famous shipping companies – *Peninsular and Orient* – and renamed the *Travencore*. The ship was capable of carrying 85 first class passengers and 34 second class. At the time of her launch she was the largest ship ever built on the Forth, but in 1880, in thick fog at Castro Bay just south of Otranto, she was wrecked. The 57 crew and passengers were saved along with the mails. Ok – we have looked –



apparently it is just off the heel of Italy! The vessel had been travelling from Bombay to Venice.

Yet another launch and certainly one where the engines and boilers were in place at that point. The *Fife Herald* of 25th November 1869 discloses that a splendid new steamer had



STEAM from LIVERPOOL to COLOMBO, MADRAS, and CALCUTTA, via SUEZ CANAL.—
To sail on the 12th October.—The magnificent new full-powered Screw Steamer **SCOTLAND**, Pinkey, Commander (well known in the P. and O. Company's service), 1,600 tons register, 500-horse power, classed at Lloyd's 100 A, and built expressly for the trade by John Key, Esq., of Kinghorn; has first-rate passenger accommodation, not exceeding two passengers being taken in any one cabin; and is fitted up with bath rooms and every convenience, including an ice-house. Carries an efficient stewardess and surgeon. For freight or passage apply to
DONALD R. MACGREGOR, Esq., Leith; or to
STODDART BROS., 30, Tower-buildings West, Liverpool.
The fine new Clyde built Steamer **GLENGYLE**, 1,700 tons register, 160-horse power, specially built for the trade, will succeed on the 20th October.

been launched to the order of a Leith firm. The 237 foot long ship was towed to Granton for the fitting out of the accommodation. A Miss White who was the daughter

of one of the owners, a Captain White, named the ship *Albatross*. It is amazing what can be found if you look and here is an advert for the *Albatross* leaving for China on the 5th Jan 1871 – it can be seen that she had already made the same trip.

A bit of a disaster here as we discover from the pages of the Greenock Advertiser on the 11th October 1870. The John Key built, *S.S. Scotland*, had hardly been launched and fitted out at Leith when a problem struck on her way from Leith to Liverpool where she would be setting out for Calcutta. A Clyde pilot was engaged to sail the *Scotland* around the north of Scotland and down to



STEAM from LIVERPOOL
To **SINGAPORE, HONG KONG and SHANGHAI,**
(Taking goods for **JAVA and JAPAN** at through rates.)
The fine full powered Screw Steamer
ALBATROSS;
1,990 tons register, classed **A** at Lloyd's,
will be despatched on or about 5th
January, 1871. This fine steamer, built in 1869 by
John Key, Esq. of Kinghorn, has already made a
voyage to China, *via* the Canal, and will be found a
most desirable opportunity for shippers.—For terms of
freight apply to the owners, Messrs. **GEO. S. SEATER**
and Co. Leith; or here to
STODDART BROTHERS,
30, Tower-buildings West.

Liverpool. In the Sound of Islay she hit and became stranded on the Black Rock. Assistance was sent from both Liverpool and Greenock and at the Board of Enquiry the skipper was exonerated – with the blame attributed to the pilot.

The *Shipping and Mercantile Gazette* on the 12th January 1871 tells of two ships ordered in rapid succession by the same company – the *Glasgow and South American Steam Navigation Co.* The first named the *Andes* had been launched on the 11th August 1870 with the second entering the water on the 9th January 1871. She was also named after a mountain range – *Alps*.

Strange to report, but both were eventually sold-on at different times to the same company – *Steinman and Ludwig*. *Andes* was renamed *Herman Ludwig* and disappeared on a trip from New York to Antwerp carrying no passengers only a cargo of grain. The crew of 40 were lost.

The *Alps* was renamed *C.F. Funch* and she also came to a sticky end when, on the 25th August 1876, she arrived in Vlissingen Roads with her cargo on fire. She was beached, burned out, and then broke in two. Yet again, the voyage was from New York to Antwerp carrying cargo only.

On the 1st June 1872 the fledgling *Fife Free Press* carried an evocative report of men labouring under the cliffs of Abden - “where nigh on 300 sons of toil, skilled in the different branches of the iron trade, may be seen beating and

sweating in shaping and plating into one – the scattered portions of a great whole”.

What was of greater interest was the mention that work was about to commence on the “pioneer” ship of the new *London and Kirkcaldy Steam Ship Company* – this was primarily a venture of the Stocks family. This first cargo/passenger vessel for the line was to be named the *Swan*. When the ship was launched on the 28th April 1873 it was in fact named the *Fifeshire*. The Stock’s family retained the line until 1918 when it was purchased by the *Dundee, Perth and London Shipping Co.* Not unexpectedly, this followed the death of the owner Major Harris L. Stocks on the Somme in 1916. Strangely, the engines for the *Fifeshire* were manufactured by J. & T. Dale of Townsend Foundry.

An unusual incident occurred in November 1872 and was reported on in Scottish, English and Welsh newspapers.

For example, the *Hampshire Examiner* reported on the 5th of November that:- “A strike of a somewhat novel nature took place on Friday the 1st November at the Kinghorn Shipbuilding Yard. It seems that the employees, who number between 300 – 400 men and boys, had been asked to agree to an alteration of the working hours which would do away with half an hour’s artificial lighting but, instead of complying, they walked out *en masse*”.

However, it seems that the walkout was part of a complaint that a promised reduction to a working week of 51 hours had

not as yet been fulfilled. The strike was quickly called off when the new working hours were put in place.

A milestone – not a nautical one – was reached and reported on by the *Fife Free Press* on the 4th January 1873. On the last day of 1872 the 15th ship built at the yard was launched. The ship was an iron screw steamer and was built for the *Union Steam Navigation Company*. This was apparently quite a feather in the cap of John Key as this company carried Her Majesty's mails between the U.K. and around the Cape of Good Hope. The launch had been delayed until Old Year's Day due to violent storms which had swept the country and had done some damage to the launch site.

The launch took place at 3.00pm which was as close to high water as possible. The ship was launched by Mrs Dickson, the wife of the master of the



ship. The ship was named *Africa* and could carry 60 first class passengers with a further 80 in second class. The ship had several areas fitted with safes and strong rooms to protect both mail and bullion.

Interestingly, the engine, described as a compound inverted cylinder direct acting screw engine, was the 140th engine of this type produced by Key! So, the 15th ship received the 140th engine which gives a clear indication that the vast

percentage of Whytebank's output was not for their own ships.

This milestone led to a function in the loft of the yard's offices where wine and cake were enjoyed. Toasts, and many of them, were the order of the day.

The *Fife Free Press* gave significant coverage to the launch and celebration. The ship was sold on in 1883 and, sadly, on the 15th February 1887 she was stranded near Abu Madaff Reef, 42 miles north of Jeddah. On the 22nd – she broke in two!

The purchaser must have been pleased with the *Africa* as the *Fifeshire Journal* discloses in its 25th September 1872 edition that another ship has been built and launched for the *Union Steam Navigation Company*. The launch took place on the 23rd and was carried out by the daughter of the Superintendent of the Company. Very similar to her sister ship, in design if not in size, accommodation was available for 60 first class passengers, with berths available for 40 in the second class salon. The ship was named *Kafir* and had been built for coastal work between the Cape of Good Hope and Zanzibar. There was none of the glitter which accompanied the launch of *Africa*, or column inches. Her fate – she struck Albatross Rock of Cape Point on the 14th February 1878 and was lost.

LAUNCH OF A MAIL STEAMER AT KINGHORN.

A magnificent iron screw steamer was launched on Tuesday afternoon from A. & A. Shipbuilding Yard (Mr John Key's.) The vessel has been specially built for the Union Steamship Company, Southampton, and is intended to carry Her Majesty's mails between the Cape of Good Hope and Zanzibar—the contract for which lately gave rise to so much public discussion. Shortly after three o'clock, and in presence of several hundred spectators, the last link which connected the noble-looking craft to the shore was struck. Instantly the vessel began slowly to move, when Miss Leir, daughter of the superintendent of the company, to whom had been entrusted the ribbon-suspended bottle with its red, white, and blue trappings, gracefully christened the vessel the *Kafir*. No sooner had the christening ceremony been performed when the vessel left the ways in fine style amidst the loud cheering of the assembled onlookers.

There was a suggestion that *Kafir* was the third ship built for that particular line. Having made the assumption that all three would have been built around the same time we failed to trace this mystery ship – until we went back to the 28th May 1866 and there she was –

Dane! Built to operate on routes which included Cape Town, Durban, Mauritius and Ceylon, she was capable of carrying 50 first class, 20 second class and 40 third class passengers. There is no mention that she was involved in carrying mail/bullion.

1871 saw a change of both name and ownership and she became the *Atlantico* but, on the 14th May 1877, readers may not be surprised to learn that she too came to a watery grave. The vessel broke from her moorings in the River Tagus near Lisbon and collided with a Portuguese warship – the *Vasco Da Gama*. She sank with her crew being saved by tugs. Her wreck was sold for scrap and fetched £225. It is perhaps possible that the sale of the *Dane* in 1871 prompted the order for *Andes* as a replacement vessel.

There seems to have been something going amiss when we examine the *Fife Herald* on the 28th August 1873. We find Sheriff Beatson Bell involved in two judgements involving John Key.

In the first, John Key and others are petitioning against a byelaw which the Corporation had passed on the 8th July. The essence of the complaint was their “decree that no unfinished vessel should be allowed into Kirkcaldy Harbour for the purpose of being fitted up without the permission of the Harbour Master being previously obtained and which they had asked his lordship to allow and confirm”. The argument was that vital berths for loading and unloading were being taken up by those being fitted out. Clearly, if permission to fit was not given, then Key and the others had a problem. In this instance permission to authorise the byelaw was refused.

However, Key was involved in another legal wrangle on the same day and this time he lost. As mentioned earlier, Key was still intermittently fitting the boilers and engines in the harbour and to assist this he had constructed a crane or shears for heavy lifting. Permission had been acquired on the 27th December 1865 with the proviso that it be dismantled on completion of the fitting out. This appears never to have taken place and they became a permanent fixture. On the 11th January 1870 the Corporation had offered Key another site for his crane at a rental of £12 per annum which he accepted. It transpires that despite paying the rental – the crane was never moved and on the 17th February 1873 the Corporation served a notice of removal for three months hence. Key contested the notice to quit but lost this appeal. So, now he had seen attempts to potentially stop the use of

the harbour for fitting out and only had to dismantle his crane. Are there problems on the horizon?

A local connection is disclosed by the *Fife Free Press* in its 24th May 1874 edition. The article covered the sea trials of the *Mactan* in the Firth of Forth with John Key and a gathering of ladies and gentlemen on board. “Capital speed was achieved and the engines gave the greatest possible satisfaction”. The ship had been ordered by one Cornelius R. B. Pickford to operate in the Philippines. The name *Mactan* is an island in the area. The local interest is in the fact that the chief engineer was an Andrew S. Pye from Pathhead. Could this be a relative of James Pye, the owner of *Peter Greig & Co*, the longstanding but recently closed linen manufacturer from the area? Subsequent research showed he was the fourth son of Pathhead shoemaker, David Pye. Sadly, he died aged 47 in a shipwreck off West Africa. The ship’s fate – the 17th January 1879, saw her wrecked off Talunanan. Mactan is indeed an island in the Philippines with a population of 550,000. The capital has the fascinating name of Lapu-Lapu City.

We find an interesting item in the *Fife Free Press* of the 4th July 1874. The item reports on a function held in the Harbour Head Hotel where friends of John Key, Jnr., have arranged a farewell meal and entertainment. The occasion is his “retiring from the management of White Bank Engine Works to take up an appointment as manager of an extensive engineering and shipbuilding works in the North of England”. These

occasions prompted many toasts and this event was no exception. In one, both Johns, senior and junior, were toasted to the accompaniment of “For they are jolly good fellows”. Young John appears to have severed all connections with the firm as we will see from later events.

The *Fifeshire Journal* of the 7th January 1875 illustrates that marine engines were still being built to order and not exclusively for ships under construction by John Key. The article reported that “John Key, Engineer, has secured a contract for supplying two new cylinders on the compound principle, also four boilers with all the latest improvements, for the *Iona*, which belongs to the *Leith and London Steam Shipping Co*”.

The *Fifeshire Advertiser* of the 7th October 1876 again offers further confirmation that everything is not marine based when it tells that the Whitebank Engine Company have won a contract for a large engine, boiler and machinery, for the new oil works at Burntisland.

No less a newspaper than the *Pall Mall Gazette* of the 25th November 1876 carries the news that George A. Key had, on the 21st of the month, married Margaret M. Dow in Dysart. There would be mixed emotions in evidence as John Key, his father, had only died six months previously. The father of the bride is Thomas Millie Dow – the artist often associated with the Glasgow Boys. The Kirkcaldy Art Gallery has a number of his works in their collection.

At this juncture we can look at two of the stationary industrial engines built at Whitebank Engine Works which are believed to be still in existence and operational. We can be very confident over one which came into operation in 1877 and was built for the specific purpose of pumping fresh



water from the Western Springs pump house to the residents of Auckland, New Zealand. This engine is now housed in the Museum of Transport and Technology in Auckland. It is still

operational and proudly displays a plate bearing the name of John Key & Sons, Engineers & Shipbuilders, Kirkcaldy No 152. There is a little less evidence for an earlier engine which is described in *Grace's Guide to British Industrial History* as a small 6 column beam engine which was restored in 2008. Its present whereabouts eludes us. However, it was built for the Aldinga Flour Mill in Adelaide which was opened in 1844. The fact is that the mill was owned by one Samuel White and Key's first ship – *the South Australian* was according to some sources built for Samuel White! *Grace's Guide* suggests that this engine was built in the 1850s,

The Glasgow Herald on the 14th May 1878 announced that a ship had been launched at Kinghorn the previous morning

LAUNCH.

KINGHORN.—Yesterday forenoon Messrs John Key & Sons launched from their building yard a finely-modelled iron sailing ship of about 1200 tons gross register, built to the order of Messrs Hatfield, Cameron & Co., Glasgow, for their Bay Line, to the highest class in Lloyd's register. The vessel received the name of "Largo Bay" from Mrs James E. Gilchrist, Greenock. The *Largo Bay* is to be commanded by Captain Cusin, and is chartered to load at Glasgow for Adelaide.

which was named *Largo Bay*. The naming ceremony was carried out by Mrs James E. Gilchrist and was ordered by Hatfield, Cameron & Co, of Glasgow. It is good to see a firm based on the Clyde using a Kinghorn shipbuilder. The *Largo Bay* will trade between Glasgow and Adelaide.

A shipping magnate's name which will feature several times in this narrative makes its first appearance via the *Dundee Courier* on the 20th September 1878. A steamer named *Keilawarra* had been launched at Abden having been ordered by *Howard Smith and Sons of Melbourne*, who was placing his first order with the yard. The ship as well as carrying cargo had accommodation for 50 first class and 50 second class passengers. She was built to a high specification meeting the standard of class 100 A1 at Lloyds. She had been towed to Kirkcaldy for fitting out and on the 29th November after being loaded at Burntisland she left for Melbourne via the Cape. (*Edinburgh Evening News*).

However, on the 8th December 1886, the *Keilawarra* on passage from Sydney to Brisbane was struck by the *S.S. Helen Nicoll*. The ships were briefly locked together and some passengers from the *Helen Nicoll* jumped onto the *Keilawarra's* deck, mistakenly thinking their ship would sink. It managed to limp into port but the *Keilawarra* went down in 7 minutes with, it is believed, the



loss of 40 people (6 from those who jumped from the Helen Nicoll). The Master of the Keilawarra, who went down with his ship, was blamed at the subsequent enquiry, but that was not the whole story. Only two lifeboats managed to be launched, many men jumped into these boats leaving women and children to drown. The inquest was told that the Master had continually shouted at the men that they were cowards. The wreck was located in 2009 when it was discovered that divers had illegally removed many items from the wreck – which included cutting open the safe door and removing the contents. (*Wreck Site*)

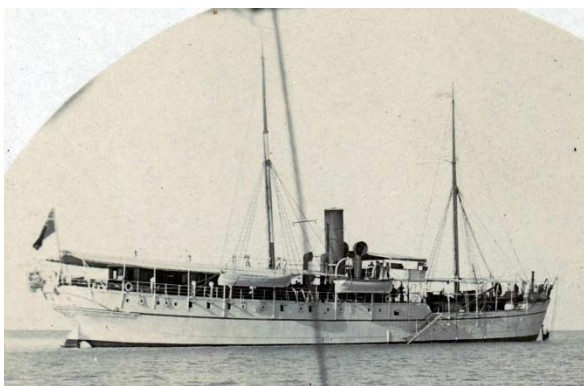
An item of interest is found in the *Liverpool Journal of Commerce* dated 25th February 1879. The ship in question is a large steamer the *Joseph Rickett* launched 3 days earlier. What is disclosed is the fact that after the launch she was towed to Kirkcaldy to have her engines and boilers



fitted. This confirms that every ship was not yet completed within the confines of the yard. This issue still remains unclear as maps of the site show cranes in place and includes a travelling one. Indeed it does seem that at some point after 1879 girders from the fallen Tay Bridge were used in the construction of a crane capable of lifting immense weights.

Yet, without doubt, some engines and boilers were being fitted in Kirkcaldy. The team's suspicion is that possibly it was easier to move some engines/boilers to the harbour at Kirkcaldy rather than the lengthier rail journey to Kinghorn. It was not until the advent of a subsequent owner that all production was moved from Kirkcaldy to Abden.

A prestigious launch is mentioned in the *Fifeshire Journal* of the 10th April 1879. A ship is being launched and she was



ordered by Her Majesty's Indian Government for cable laying in the Persian Gulf. The ship was named *Patrick Stewart* and was launched by Mrs Colonel Champagne. She was built to the exacting highest standard required by Lloyds. We are

told without any disclosure that "Several important modifications had been made by the Admiralty to ensure the safety of the ship" - ? After the launch we are told that a select company enjoyed cake and wine in the 'loft' – including; Sir William Merryweather, Colonel Champagne, Captain Stiffe and Provost Swan. Curiosity got the better of us here – why this name? Transpires the ship was named after the first Director General of the Indian Telegraph Service. The *Patrick Stewart* was based in Karachi and remained in service for a total of 45 years. With a vivid display of imagination her replacement was named *Patrick Stewart*.

It was on the 23rd June 1879 that probably the most iconic vessel the yard built was launched. This was the *William Muir*



William Muir

although her name was normally shorted to *Willie Muir*. Built as a sister ship for the *John Stirling* both were ordered by the *North British Railway Company* as passenger ferries to be used on the Granton to Burntisland

route. Both vessels were named after directors of the company. The *William Muir* was 19 feet shorter than her sister. The *Fife Free Press* reported on the 28th June that she was “furnished with a turtle-back over-deck in front, sheltering the deck passengers and horse accommodation. The aft salon and promenade overhead are quite as spacious as in other vessels”. George A. Key was named as the builder and the ship was launched by his sister-in-law Miss Dow.

On the 2nd August the same newspaper was able to report that:- “her engines and speed had been tested and the compasses adjusted by trial trips and was employed in the regular passenger service of the ferry from Wednesday. She accomplished her first crossing in 27 minutes from pier to pier, but it is expected when her machinery gets into trim that she will equal the speed of her mate *John Stirling* and do the passage on an average of 25 minutes. The *William Muir* has been placed under the command of Captain William Morrison, the oldest “Master” in the company’s service,

whose experience of the ferry dates almost from the company's first connection with it in 1847.

So what made the *William Muir* such an iconic feature of Burntisland life? From inception she worked exclusively on the Granton/Burntisland route except for a period in 1917



when she was requisitioned for minesweeping duties. Capable of carrying 950 passengers, when she was withdrawn from service in March 1937, it was estimated that she had make 80,000 crossings each way and had travelled in excess of 800,000 miles. This information was gleaned from the *Scotsman* of the 11th February 1937.

It also disclosed that one of her most unusual trips lasted from 10.00pm until 04.00am when, in 1889, both *John*



Stirling and *William Muir* ferried the whole of Lord George Sangster's Circus and Menagerie from Granton to Burntisland. The 'cargo' included 500 horses, camels, dromedaries, elephants

and other animals, plus 50 caravans. Apparently when some difficulties arose moving some of the caravans, the largest elephant, Jumbo, rendered assistance!

The *William Muir* was replaced in 1836 by the *Snowdrop* who had her name changed to *Thane of Fife*. There is a very sad photograph of the two ships, lying side by side, taken on the *William Muir's* last day



in service. After 58 years she sailed off to the breakers yard at Charlestown.

The deckhouse of the *William Muir* was preserved and for many years could be seen at *Brucehaven Sailing Club*. Sadly, when contact was recently made, it was no longer there – if it ever was, as no one seemed to know the first thing about it!

What was the fate of the *John Stirling*? She was launched in 1876, made redundant in 1892, and broken up in 1899.

However, the launch of the *William Muir* was a double edged sword as the *Dundee Courier* of the 26th June reported under the heading;- **The Engineering and Shipbuilding Trade** – “The above trades in this district are at present showing gloomy prospects. At the engineering works of Messrs. John Key & Son, Kirkcaldy, most of the men employed at the works were dismissed and at Abden Shipbuilding Yard, belonging to the same firm, nearly all of the men have received notice to quit. There is not a single ship on the slip – the last having been recently launched for the North British Railway Company. At

Dunnikier Foundry trade is also dull, nearly all the journeymen having been dismissed”.

The Fife Free Press of the 28th June added to the sombre tones when it painted a picture:-“Since Tuesday last, rumours have circulated freely in the town respecting the stability of the well-known firm of Messrs John Key & Sons, a firm who employ a large number of hands in Kirkcaldy and Kinghorn. The fact that work has been suspended both in the engineering and shipbuilding departments of this firm gives colour to these reports. The liabilities are variously estimated, but are generally believed to be upwards of £40,000, while the difficulties of the firm are attributable solely to the long-continued depression in the shipbuilding trade. This suspension of work by the firm has thrown a large number of workmen out of employment and will cause considerable distress in the district. It is understood that several local tradesmen are heavily involved and that the position of a merchant in the iron trade is jeopardised”.

Thankfully, we managed to locate a little lighter news in the *Dundee People's Journal* on the 9th August. The headline was:- **“A Close Race Between Two Dundee Owned Ships:-** “The two Dundee owned barques *Peru* and *Chili* left Conception Bay, South America, on



the same day with cargoes of wheat and, after running neck and neck for 86 days, were announced in the same telegram as having passed the Lizard on Wednesday morning at 5.30. Both have reached Falmouth in the course of the forenoon. The above vessels are sister ships and built by John Key & Sons, Kirkcaldy”.

Matters had taken a turn for the worse when the *Dundee Courier* next reported on the 10th September. An examination in Bankruptcy had taken place in the Edinburgh Bankruptcy Court on Monday in the cases of George A. Key, Alexander Key (as individuals) and John Key & Sons. As these were the only two partners it is evidence that John Key Jnr. had severed all connections when he left for the North of England. The well-known Kirkcaldy engineer, Robert Douglas (Messrs Douglas & Grant), had been appointed as Trustee. Douglas was satisfied with the information provided which in simple terms was that the firm had liabilities of £26,180 and assets of £18,926 leaving a shortfall of £7,254. The assets figure included the sum of £13,282 due from the estate of the late John Key. One of the firm’s creditors had asked for an adjournment and this was granted with a date set in October to reconvene.

The *Fife Free Press* covered the reconvened examination in its edition of the 4th October 1879. In what was a lengthy report we will simply give the salient points.

The 'new' firm, with the brothers as the sole partners, had commenced trading in May 1876 after their father's death. Prior to that George had been assumed a partner in January 1876 having worked with the firm for 10 years and "having secured a good knowledge of its operations". The initial partnership was for a term of five years or the death of a partner if earlier. With John Key's death the original firm would be closed down and replaced by a new firm, still carrying the original name, with the two brothers as the principals.

In the examination it was stated that the original business run by the father had been both "extensive and profitable". Keep in mind that while the business may well have been *John Key & Sons* – George had no part in its ownership until January of 1876 and Alexander had no part at all.

What can be gleaned is that at the date of John Key's death the firm had a credit balance of £5,593. However, John Key's personal account carried a debit balance of £39,432. This suggests that the borrowing for the business was provided from a personal account. Given the firm's credit balance was transferred to reduce the personal overdraft, it is clear that the borrowing was not covered by any insurance policy. What is very obvious is that the assets and liabilities of John Key as an individual were also treated as the assets and liabilities of his company. A new account in the firm's name

was opened by the now partners with an unsecured overdraft.

The firm, as they gathered in funds, made transfers from time to time to reduce the father's overdraft and by May 1879 these credits had totalled £20,830.

On the 13th May the firm's overdraft stood at £9,657. A bill of exchange for £4,874 had been due that day to Mr Harley (Iron Founder) and the bank refused to meet it. The refusal to meet a bill of exchange is similar to a cheque being dishonoured, thereby casting grave doubt on a firm's financial soundness. While a cheque, if unpaid, is returned to the payee on the day of presentation, a bill of exchange can be held by the bank and paid as and when the bank deems fit – or otherwise.

On the 17th May a credit of £5,000 was paid into the account but the bill of exchange remained unpaid. A further credit of £3,500 followed on the 20th but still the bill remained outstanding. The bank seemingly agreed to meet the bill on the 6th June – irrespective if there were further credits or not – ultimately this did not happen. It was only when a further credit of £4099 was applied on the 9th June 1879 that the £4,874 was met. By this time Harley had further bills outstanding of £6200 – not a pleasant situation for either.

The Bank had asked for another statement of affairs and assets and, when this was produced on the 20th June, this time the bank refused to accept the £13,282 from John Key's

estate as part of the firm's assets – stating this made them insolvent – refused any further facilities and that included the employee's wages – explaining why the firm ground to a halt as covered earlier by the *Fife Free Press* Report of the 28th June.

Alexander Key was mentioned as being employed in Hastings and was not present at the examination. Presumably, he only took up the Hasting's post in the June when John Key & Sons ceased trading.

Details are a little sketchy after the sequestration but we know from the *Fifeshire Advertiser* on the 7th August 1880 that: - *Messrs. Key's Works* resumed on Monday morning at 6 o'clock, at which time, the road in front of the establishment was clad with a large number of workmen eager for employment. The supply, of course, was too great for the demand, and during the day it was necessary to post a notice at the gate that no more workmen of any kind were required at present". The business will be carried on under the name of the late firm, John Key & Sons, by the late Mr Key's two sons, Andrew and Alexander, who have also taken into partnership, Mr Cecil Bond, an English gentleman of ability in the marine department". It will be demonstrated, later in the text, that they had re-commenced life, after assuming the new partner, with no borrowing facilities from the bank and modest capital of £4,000.

The 6th November 1880 saw the *Fifeshire Advertiser* report on a contract which John Key & Sons had won. Having built two ferries for the Granton to Burntisland route, there may have been a tinge of disappointment that the *Midlothian*, a baggage boat for the ferry, was being built at Leith, but there was some consolation that her engines and boilers were about to be Kirkcaldy built.

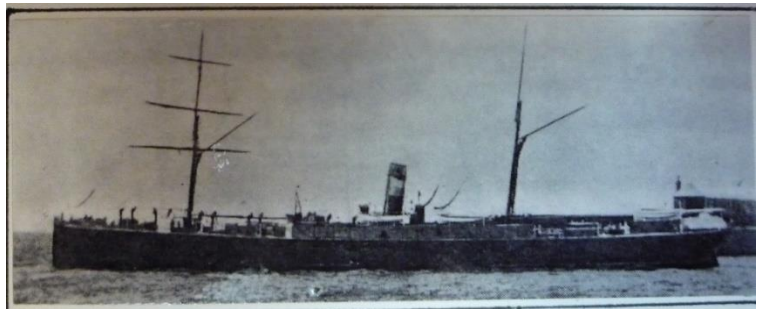
By the 21st May 1881, the *Fife Free Press* was in confident mood when it reported that –“The engineering trade in this district has recently shown signs of revival, especially in the marine department. At Whytebank a night shift is employed. As previously noted, this energetic firm lately obtained the contract for the engines required for the new goods ferry-boat which is to ply on the passage between Burntisland and Granton”. The engines were the largest built in Kirkcaldy up to that date and would fit a room 32 metres by 12 metres.

“John Key & Sons have two ships on the stocks – the first laid down around the time of the New Year is the largest ever built at Abden; and the second about the size of the *Keilawarra*, ordered in consequence of the great satisfaction the vessel has given since going out to Melbourne”.

The *Fifeshire Advertiser* of the 25th February 1882 reported on a red letter day for the shipyard. Perhaps there were flights of fancy in the air when the paper reported:- “Not since the launch of the *Great Michael* some 400 years ago at Newhaven has any vessel created so much interest as the

one launched on Sunday. It had been intended to launch the vessel on Saturday afternoon at 2.30pm and arrangements for this purpose had been made in a somewhat large and novel way”.

The ship in question was the *Mentmore*, one of three identical vessels being built at different yards for joint owners –



The Baltimore and Ohio Railway Company and William Johnston and Sons of Liverpool.

The sole and exclusive purpose of these ships was the transportation of cattle and grain across the oceans. The vessels had three decks and were capable of carrying 1000 animals. The ships featured a massive ventilation system plus huge doors on either side of the ship to aid the admission and exit of the cattle. The troughs and stalls were fixed and above all each vessel was fitted with a condenser capable of producing fresh water at a rate of 8,000 gallons per day.

What attracted attention was not just the magnitude of the vessel but the fact that the traditional method of removing the blocks to allow her to glide into the Firth was not being used – instead 31 charges of dynamite would remove the blocks!

LAUNCH OF THE MENTMORE.

Perhaps not since the launch of the Great Michael, some 400 years ago, at Newhaven, has any vessel created so much interest as the one which was launched on Sunday from the shipbuilding yard of Messrs John Key & Son, Kinghorn. It had been intended to launch the vessel on Saturday afternoon at 2.30, and arrangements for this purpose had been made on a somewhat large and novel style. As the utmost interest was taken in the event by the different communities around, the Railway Company ran a special train from Kirkcaldy and the neighbouring towns, so that every facility might be given to those who cared to visit the quaint old burgh. Kirkcaldy Station presented a very stirring scene, hundreds of people being gathered there regardless of the storm of wind then blowing. But a sudden disappointment came on the receipt of the news that, owing to the gale, no launch would take place that day. A great many people sought their way home again, but on the train coming up at the time specified a considerable number took their

The launch had attracted widespread interest and special trains were being run to bring spectators to the event. Sadly, a storm had blown up and a telegram arrived from the insurers saying *“if the launch went ahead in these conditions it would be at Key’s own risk”*. Rather than delay the launch until the next high tide (approx. 2 weeks) the decision was made to launch on the Sunday – much to the consternation of the church. In fairness it has to be said that the firm were on the horns of a dilemma – they could hardly leave the dynamite in place for a fortnight and trying to remove it would also be fraught with danger.

By Sunday the gale had abated producing a fine day and the report tells that *“accordingly large numbers of people flocked from Kirkcaldy in the afternoon, a constant stream pouring westwards by the shore, the railway and the turnpike. Other towns also contributed their quota, even from inland Markinch, so that on a rough estimate the numbers could not be less than 12,000 or 15,000”*.

The launch was carried out by Miss Bond, the sister of Cecil Bond, and clearly the fact it was a Sunday was not overlooked as it was noted that *“the necessary arrangements for the launch were carried out with as much decorum as possible and the exploding of the dynamite charges was the only sound heard”*.

Danger was ever present in the engineering and shipbuilding industries and sadly accidents were commonplace. Rather

than give numerous examples this one incident is intended to serve as a reminder of the dangers. The *Dundee Courier* of the 15th January 1883 reported on an accident at the Whytebank Engine Works on the previous Saturday. Around 10.00am James Hayes, aged 60, from Pathhead lost his footing from the top of the travelling crane and fell some 20 feet to his death.

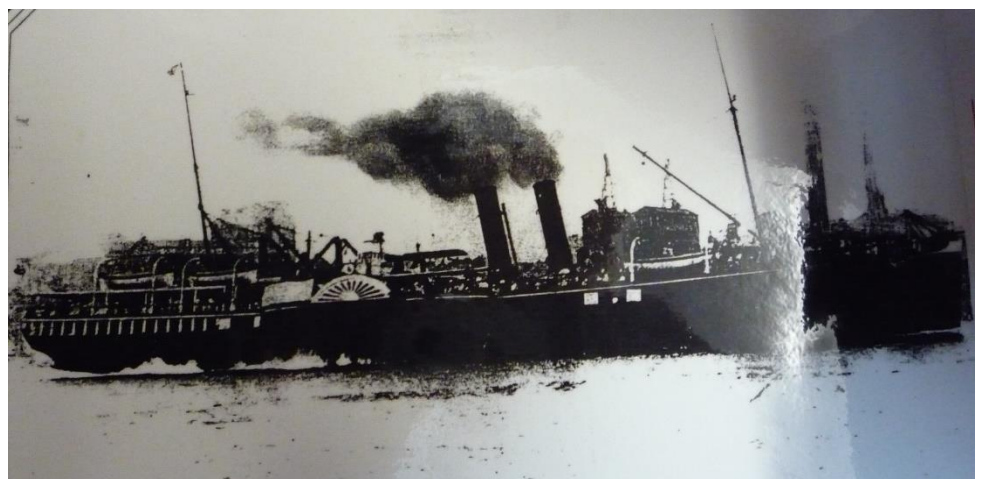
In the same terms as above – in busy times there were

ENGINE - FITTERS, Turners, and Smiths
Wanted. Apply JOHN KEY & SONS,
Whitebank Engine Works, Kirkcaldy.

constant adverts for all types of tradesmen in the

iron trade. As an example, this is an advert from the *Dundee Advertiser* of the 10th February 1883. Note that applicants must be “accustomed to heavy work”. It is a truism that at one time all manual work was hard.

The Scotsman of the 21st February 1883 tells us that Messrs. John Key & Sons of Whitebank Engine Works had succeeded in casting the largest and heaviest cylinder ever manufactured in Kirkcaldy. The cylinder, which was for use on a paddle steamer currently being built at Abden is 100 inches in diameter and weighs 25 tons! A little research disclosed this to be the paddle steamer *Naomi* whose launch was covered in



the *Fife Free Press* of the 4th August that same year. She had been launched the previous day and was a large vessel of 1,200 tons. This steel ship was built to the order of the *Hunter River New Steam Navigation Company*. The route planned for her was sailing between Sydney and Newcastle plus travelling up the Hunter River as far as Morpeth. The vessel could accommodate 150 first class passengers along with 90 travelling second class. Between decks there was stabling for 40 horses! The launch was described as “one of the most successful ever witnessed at Kinghorn the vessel gliding slowly but steadily and majestically into the blue waters of the Forth amid the cheers of a large gathering of town’s-people and others who had gathered to witness the christening ceremony which was gracefully performed by Mrs Thomas, the wife of Mr F.J Thomas, the manager of the company”.

The vessel was then taken in tow by two tugs to Kirkcaldy where she was to be fitted out and made ready for her sea trials. She was to feature feathered paddles and her engines were to work at a pressure of 2,000 horse power which would give a speed of 15 knots.

A nice touch was covered by the *Fifeshire Advertiser* on the 16th October 1883. The Kinghorn treasurer of Edinburgh’s Royal Infirmary had, during the previous week, forwarded a cheque for £33-14-02. Of this sum, £20.6/- had been contributed by the men and boys of John Key & Sons. The

total was believed to be the largest sum ever sent from the district.

The *Fife Free Press* of the 15th December was able to report that on her trials – the anticipated speed being achieved. The report also mentioned that “special attention was given to ventilation and that Norton’s Patented System had been introduced”.

What the *Press* possibly missed but was reported by the *Fifeshire Advertiser*, on the same day, was that after completion of her trials, as the *Naomi* entered Leith, she collided with the West Pier causing some damage to her port bow and to the pier itself. Apparently she also did some minimal damage to the tug, *Her Majesty* and a smack *Blossom*.

Quite a contradiction in terms was contained in the *Fife Free Press* of the 24th March 1883. The report was under the heading:- *Annual Gathering of Employees* – the perceived contradiction was that this was in fact the inaugural gathering! However, it does show just how extensive a business this was as there were 350 attendees. The article tells that the event was held in the ‘draughting loft’ of the shipyard and the room was 44 yards in length. It had been decorated to a “pleasing standard and models of ships built by the firm were on display”. George A. Key and his

through. The following ladies and gentlemen took part in the musical entertainment :— Messrs H. M’Pake, W. Abbie, W. Barry, G. Brown, A. Murray, G. Wardlaugh, A. Page, J. Aitken, and W. Duncan, and Misses Heigh, B. Oswald, and E. Oswald, the whole acquitting themselves to the entire satisfaction of the large assemblage. The Misses Oswald in their usual accomplished style presided at the piano. The 11th F.A.V. band was also present, and tended much to the evening’s enjoyment by discoursing several select pieces with great taste. The purveying was conducted by Mr J. Kininmonth, Kirkcaldy, who deserves great praise for the way in which the same was accomplished. A word of praise is also due to the committee of management, who left nothing undone to provide for the comfort of those present. Altogether, the gathering was a great success. The usual votes of thanks brought the proceedings to a close.

wife, Alexander Key and Miss Key were in attendance – but there was no mention of Cecil Bond. Three ministers – the Rev. Messrs. Dobie, Wilson and Shaw along with a number of luminaries which included Messrs Swan, Hendry and Barnet from Kirkcaldy were present along with dignitaries from Kinghorn. After an splendid tea provided by Mr Kinninmonth of Kirkcaldy there a “long and varied programme of entertainment”.

Prior to that, on the 6th June 1883, the *Dundee Courier* reported that the previous day a large screw steamer, built to the order of William Howard Smith & Sons, Melbourne had been launched. This was the third vessel built for the same firm. She was designed to carry 80 first class, 100 second class passengers on the Melbourne, Sydney and Newcastle route. The ship, 280 feet in length, was christened *Gabo* by Miss Key of Whitebank before being towed to Kirkcaldy to be fitted out. This included electric lighting on the incandescent system. An announcement in relation to her maiden voyage which appeared in the *Fife Free Press* on the 23rd June 1863 is shown here.

The 16th June saw an advert appear in the *Fife Free Press* for the maiden voyage of the *Burwah*. The ship was leaving Kirkcaldy for London and then Plymouth before heading for Queensland. The advert mentioned the luxurious fittings and



STEAM to MELBOURNE and SYDNEY (via Cape), taking Passengers for QUEENSLAND. The Splendid New Steel Steamer "BURWAH," Captain J. H. SOUTH, 1000 Tons Register, 109 AI at Lloyds, will embark First and Second-Class Passengers in the LONDON DOCKS on THURSDAY, July 5th, and at PLYMOUTH two days later. She is superbly fitted and decorated by the Art Furnishing Alliance of Bond Street, London; is Electrically Lighted, has Bath-Rooms, Boudoir, Piano, &c.; carries an Experienced Surgeon and Stewardesses. Fares, First Class, from 45 Guineas; Second-Class, from 25 Guineas.
Apply to JOHN KEY & SONS, Kirkcaldy.

she was equipped with a surgeon and stewardesses. The fare for a first class passenger was 45 guineas with a second class berth costing 25 guineas. She was leaving on the 21st June.

Industrial action appeared on the horizon and was the subject of a report in the *Fifeshire Advertiser* on the 30th June 1883. It was suggested that the fact that engineering firms were extremely busy had led to the Union of Boilermakers flexing their industrial muscles. A wage rise had been agreed with platers now earning between £1.55 and £1.60 per week. Riveters were only slightly behind with earnings between £1.50 and £1.55 per week. The Union then pressed for a reduction in the apprentices on the basis that there were too many employed in relation to journeymen. In the case of John Key & Sons the threatened strike was averted by reducing the apprentices and the firm also dismissed a foreman whom the Union claimed was obnoxious to the men. This was not the line taken by the Dales of Townsend Foundry!

The *Fife Free Press* was certainly in an upbeat mood on the 4th August 1883 under a headline – **The Engineering Trade of the District** – “The engineering trade which stands in the front rank among the staple industries of the district, at present gives evidence of great activity by every department, and for this too much credit cannot be given to the various firms for the laudable spirit of enterprise and the distinguished business capabilities which they evidence in

securing so many extensive orders, the execution of which affords employment to several thousand working men. The work, which has been, and is still, turned out from the principal foundries in Kirkcaldy and from the shipbuilding yard at Abden, is to a great extent sent to foreign countries, and while it is satisfactory to know that the manner in which these orders are executed is giving the utmost satisfaction in other climes, it must also afford no small amount of pride that such a large trade with foreign countries is being carried on in the town”.

The article went on to highlight the work being undertaken by both the Dunnikier and Townsend foundries but the first summary referred to John Key & Sons in a retrospective of the work undertaken from the start of the year. Three large steamers all of which had been fitted out in Kirkcaldy harbour had been launched. The *Glenmore* and the *Heathmore* had been built for William Johnston & Sons of Liverpool and were designed to carry cargoes on a very small consumption of coal. The third, the *Burwah*, was “a high class passenger ship and no trouble or expense was grudged to make her as complete and comfortable a floating home for her passengers as possible”.

The fact that the recently launched *Burwah* had safely arrived in Melbourne was reported in the *Fifeshire Advertiser* of the 8th September 1883.

Of the work in hand, *The Gabo* was fast approaching completion and “is also being fitted out as a first class passenger steamer, with every appliance for comfort and safety”. The paddle steamer *Naomi* was also moving towards completion and three orders were in hand for the Australasian Steam Navigation Company and closer to home a ship had been ordered by William Todd Moffatt of Aberdeen.

There is a useful report in the *Fife Free Press* of the 22nd September 1883 which outlines the sequence of Australian orders at that time. Although the article was in the main concentrating on the launch of the *Cahors* it mentions “that there is great credit to the Messrs Key that, in the fleet of Australian vessels, there are already no fewer than four steamers of their construction plying between the different ports there. The *Keilaware* was the first sent out for Messrs. Howard Smith & Sons; then the *Ranelagh* and the *Glanworth* for the order of the Australasian Steam Navigation Company and designed to eclipse that of the rival company. Next came another order from Messrs. Howard Smith & Sons to build the *Burwah* that superbly fitted up steamer, which left our port a few months ago, and whose arrival in Sydney we chronicled last week. She, in turn, was intended to outstrip the *Ranelagh* and the *Glanworth*; but not withstanding the satisfaction these two vessels have given, *the Cahors*, which is for the Australasian Steam Navigation Company, has been

designed to supersede both as regards her attainable speed and the comfort to be provided for passengers”.

Turning back to the launch of the *Cahors*, in September 1883, she had been built to Lloyd’s highest A1 standard, and could carry 69 first class passengers and 80 second class.

A crowd of several hundred had gathered to see this launch where again the old method of splitting the blocks out from behind to send her down the slipway had given way to dynamite being used to clear away the blocks. It was Mrs Neville Cohen the wife of a director who launched the ship.

The *Ranelagh* seems to have been a particularly unlucky ship. During her trials and compass setting



LOSS OF A NEW KIRKCALDY-BUILT STEAMER.— On Tuesday a telegram was received by Messrs Key & Son, Kirkcaldy, conveying the news of the total loss of the s.s. *Ranelagh* while plying between Sydney and Brisbane, the scene of the disaster being King’s Reef, about 30 miles distant from Cardwell. The s.s. *Ranelagh* was a new steamer, built by Messrs Key & Sons at Kinghorn Shipbuilding Yard to the order of the Australasian Steam Navigation Company of Sydney, and only left this country a few months ago for her destination. She was a substantial

on the Forth a lunch had been held on board where the three partners of John Key & Sons were in attendance. John Barry of Barry, Ostlere and Shepherd was also a guest and of

course he was the M.P. of South Wexford at the time. The *Sapphire* had been ‘coaling’ the *Ranelagh* when a seaman called Nelson almost fell overboard but was “cleverly caught by the heels for only the loss of his cap”. The ship left for Sydney shortly thereafter and in 36 hours had passed Dover.

She had an accident in the June, was aground twice in September 1882 and finally was wrecked off Queensland in 1889.

The *Glanworth* was featured in the *Scotsman* on the 10th July 1882. The report covered her sea trials following the fitting of her engines etc., in Kirkcaldy. The trials proved very satisfactory as “she steamed from Kirkcaldy to Inchkeith and ran from the Inch to Mickerie, a distance of 5 miles, at an average speed of 13 knots being half a knot above the builder’s guarantee. She then headed for the May Island at an easy speed, and made the run of 35 miles at the rate of 12 knots an hour”. At the conclusion of the trials she made for Leith where he took on coal for the voyage to Sydney leaving on the 11th. Sadly on the 26th January 1896 she hit rocks and was wrecked at Settlement Point near Brisbane.



An astonishing incident was reported in the *Fife Free Press* on the 10th November 1883 and is probably the most unexpected ‘discovery’ of our research. While dramatic headlines are sometimes exaggerated – this one was not! **Riot of the High Seas:-** related to the *Gabo* which on the 6th September had set out for Melbourne via Cape

A RIOT ON THE HIGH SEAS.

SCENES ON BOARD A KIRKCALDY
BUILT VESSEL.

Town carrying cargo as well as 30 first class passengers and 40 second class passengers. On the 22nd September the ship would cross the Equator and preparations were made for the *Crossing the Line Ceremony*. This initiation ceremony is water based and is undergone by crew and passengers who had not crossed the Equator previously. However, a deputation of second class passengers advised the Captain that they did not want to take part and he had maintained no one would be forced to, although he was disappointed as it was a maritime tradition.

However that is not what transpired – when the crew members dressed as Neptune, a barber and 4 policemen armed with sticks began the ceremony at 3.00pm all went well as they had started by ‘ducking’ two first class passengers. When they attempted to ‘arrest’ a second class passenger this was immediately resisted by his fellow passengers, and equal determination was shown by the crew, who used their sticks freely. “A scene of indescribable confusion and excitement followed with crew and passengers joining in a regular hand to hand fight”. Captain Clarke ran to his cabin and returned with two revolvers one of which he gave to the First Mate. The ‘riot’ was eventually quelled but one passenger had a nasty head wound from which “blood was freely flowing” and others required medical attention. The passengers were then asked to surrender any guns in their luggage and almost unbelievably 6 or 7 were handed over. The second class passengers, as a punishment were

banned from the upper deck for a period. What happened on disembarking is not clear but it was certainly an adventurous maiden voyage.

The *Aberdeen Evening News* on the 28th November 1883 reported on the launch of a screw steamer of 160 feet, the *Crathie*, built for a Mr Todd Moffatt of Aberdeen. We are informed that she was built under a special survey putting the vessel at Class 100 A1 at Lloyds. The ship was fitted with all the improvements to allow rapid loading and unloading of the cargo. The ship was launched by Miss Moffatt, sister of the owner, and will be under the command of Captain James E. Irvine.

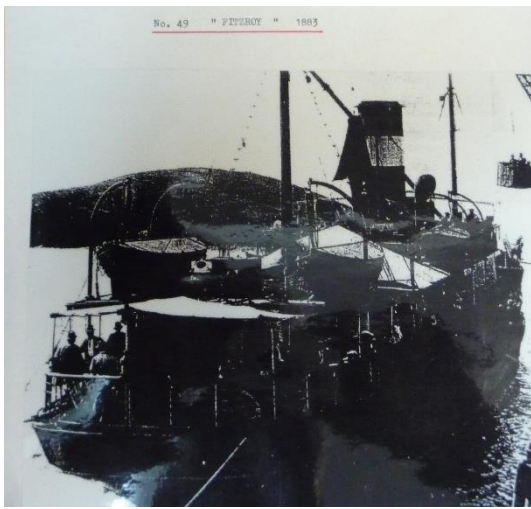
The *Fife Free Press* of the 2nd February 1884 was able to announce the launch of the *Eurimbla* for the Australasian Steam Navigation Company. The ship was intended for the Australian Coasting trade and was launched by Miss Welsh the daughter of Kinghorn's Dr Welsh. This ship was fitted out at Pettycur harbour instead of Kirkcaldy, Granton or Leith.



The *Fifeshire Journal* of the 28th of the month told of the sea trials of the *Cahors* on the 22nd. She had steamed up the Firth as far as the Forth Bridge and on turning ran the measured mile attaining a speed of 15 knots. The ship has been fitted

with electric light and had all the modern appliances for loan and unloading cargo.

The East of Fife Record of the 14th March 1884 announced that the *Crathie* had successfully completed her trials after being fitted out. She was the first of a new line of vessels for the Aberdeen coasting trade and had sailed for Newcastle (England) to load a cargo intended for the Granite City.



The final positive news was contained in the *Fifeshire Advertiser* of the 12th April. The *Fitzroy* was fitted out and her sea trials were satisfactory. She would soon be on her way. The yard was now running short of work and it was only a fortnight before:-

Probably the worst possible news but perhaps not unexpected was announced by amongst others, *The East of Fife Record* of the 25th April 1884; **Reported Heavy Failure at Kirkcaldy:-** “Messrs John Key and Sons, shipbuilders and Ironmongers, have issued a circular to their creditors stating that, owing to dullness in trade, they have been compelled to suspend payments and that a meeting of creditors will be held at an early date. It is stated that the estate, if realised, would yield a surplus of £17,000. The firm was originally established in Kinghorn about 1860 by Mr John Key, who died in 1876. Subsequent to that date the business was

carried on by his 2 sons who in 1879 assumed a third partner, Mr C.P.W. Bond. Between 500 and 600 workmen will, it is said, be affected by the failure”.

The previously mentioned meeting of creditors did indeed take place and was reported on by the *Scotsman* in its edition of the 3rd May 1884 under the heading, **The Affairs of Messrs Key & Sons, shipbuilders, Kirkcaldy:-** At a meeting of the creditors of John Key & Sons, Kirkcaldy and Kinghorn, held yesterday in the Accountant’s Hall, Glasgow, Mr Harley, Iron Merchant, Kirkcaldy, the largest creditor, on the grounds of his very thorough knowledge of Messrs. Key’s business, was unanimously appointed Trustee, and a committee was also named to co-operate with him. Mr Harley stated that he felt confident that they would be able to give a good account of the estate, to finish the ships on hand so as to secure at least the reversion estimated by the Glasgow experts. The losses of the firm, it was said, stem from several contracts not turning out profitably, especially that of the ship “*Cahors*”. A statement of affairs and assets was presented. A copy of the document is shown here but in essence the assets were £22,997 with liabilities of £32,787 leaving a deficit of £9,790. While to modern eyes this may seem modest, the deficit today equates to £1,400,000.

All this means, that from the point where the partners grant a trust deed, it will be the trustee and his committee who call the shots in every aspect of the two businesses. If they could

finish the ships to secure the final payments, sell the engine works and shipyard at valuation and then do the same with the stock and machinery it was hoped to pay the creditors 14 shillings (70p) in the £. Valuations are one thing – achieving the price another!

NOTICE.

INTIMATION IS HEREBY GIVEN to all concerned, that Messrs JOHN KEY & SONS, Engineers and Shipbuilders, carrying on business as such at Whitebank Engine Works, Kirkcaldy, and Abden Shipyard, Kinghorn, both in the County of Fife, and GEORGE ANDREW KEY, ALEXANDER KEY, and CECIL PHILIP WILLIAM BOND, all Engineers and Shipbuilders at Kirkcaldy and Kinghorn, the sole Partners of said Firm of JOHN KEY & SONS, as such, and as individuals, have granted a Trust Deed, dated the 8th day of May, 1884, in favour of JOHN HARLEY, Iron Merchant in Kirkcaldy, as Trustee for behoof of their Creditors.

The TRUSTEE hereby calls on all Creditors of said Firm, or Partners thereof, as such, and as individuals, to lodge with him, on or before 16th June, 1884, a state of their Claims, with the relative Vouchers.

JOHN HARLEY, Trustee.

Kirkcaldy, 9th May, 1884.

On the 8th of the month the trust deed/deeds had been prepared and signed. *The Fifeshire Advertiser* of the 9th May carried the intimation that George Andrew Key, Alexander Key and Cecil Philip William Bond had signed as both partners and individuals. The statutory request that all creditors should make their claims with

supporting voucher to Mr Harley was contained in the intimation.

The Fife News of the 12th July revealed that two previously mentioned Messrs Key built ships had safely arrived in Sydney. They were the *Fitzroy* which arrived on the 5th July and on the 20th of the previous month the *Cahors* (she of the unprofitable contract) had safely docked. Telegrams appeared to be the method of sourcing the news.

A meeting in Edinburgh features in a report contained in the *Fifeshire Advertiser* of the 26th July 1884:- “A meeting of the creditors of Messrs John Key & Sons (called by the trustee Mr John Harley) carrying on business at Whitebank Engine Works and Abden Shipyard and of George A. Key, Alexander Key and Cecil P.W. Bond was held in Dowell’s Rooms, Edinburgh on Tuesday, to consider an offer made by George A. Key to purchase the trust estate, for the purpose of providing funds for the payment of a composition to the creditors. Mr Harley presided. The offer which was contained in a circular issued by the trustee, and which was unanimously accepted by the meeting was in these terms:-

THE AFFAIRS OF MESSRS JOHN KEY & SONS, SHIPBUILDERS, KIRKCALDY.

A meeting of the creditors of this firm of engineers and shipbuilders (called by the trustee, Mr John Harley), carrying on business at Whitebank Engine Works, Kirkcaldy, and Abden Shipyard, and of George Andrew Key, Alexander Key, and Cecil Philip William Bond, the sole partners of the firm, was held in Dowell’s Rooms, Edinburgh, on Tuesday, to consider an offer made by Mr G. A. Key to purchase the trust-estate for the purpose of providing funds for the payment of a composition to the creditors. Mr Harley presided. The offer, which was contained in a circular issued by the trustee, and which was unanimously accepted by the meeting, was in these terms:—

“ Mr Key offered, for a transfer to him of my interest as trustee in the works and plant at Abden and Whitebank, and in the other assets of the firm, to pay me, as trustee, on 1st October 1884, the sum of £9500, or such other sum as I shall find will pay a dividend of 6s. per £ on the claims of the ordinary creditors; Mr Key to pay all preferable claims and expenses incurred by me, my commission, law expenses, and the expense of winding-up the estate; and to grant security to my satisfaction, and to relieve me of all claims of whatever kind, against the estate, or against me as trustee, any balance of funds in my hands as at 1st October being accounted for by me to Mr Key. If Mr Key is unable to pay the money referred to, or fulfil his other obligations by 1st October, the arrangement with him to fail, and the estate to be wound up by me under the trust.

Mr George A. Key offered for a transfer to him of my interest as trustee in the works and plant at Abden and Whitebank, and in the other assets of the firm, to pay me, as trustee, on the 1st October 1884, the sum of £9,500, or such other sum as I find will pay a dividend of 6 shillings (30p) per £ on the claims of the ordinary creditors; Mr Key to pay all preferable claims and expenses incurred by me, my commission, law expenses, and the expenses of winding up the estate; and to

grant security to my satisfaction, and to relieve me of all charges of whatever kind against the estate; or against me as trustee, any balance of funds in my hands at the 1st October being accounted for by me to Mr Key. If Mr Key is unable to pay the money referred to, or fulfil his other obligations by the 1st October, the arrangement with him to fall, and the estate is to be wound up by me under the trust deed in the usual manner. The management of the estate is in the meantime to remain with me as if no arrangement had been entered into with Mr Key”.

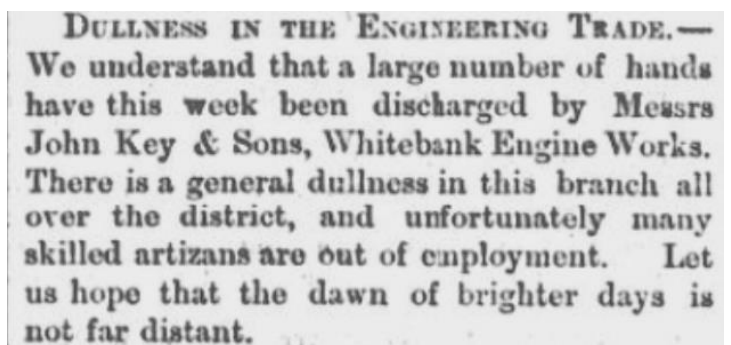
This factual report was followed by an earnest hope from the column writer:- “It is satisfactory to see that there is some prospect of this firm resuming business, and we trust that the above arrangement may be carried out, in the interest of the people of the district”. The foregoing shows that a valuation can be wildly inaccurate – it was not so long ago that there were expectations of 14 shillings in the £ - now it was looking likely to be 6 shillings.

Another ship had been successfully completed, as the *Edinburgh Evening News* noted in its columns of the 31st July that *the Eurimbla* had left for Sydney from Leith with a cargo of bunker coal.

Rumour sprang from the pages of the *Fife News* in its edition of the 16th August 1884 but as so often happens the article was a combination of good and bad news:- “It is rumoured this week that there is a probability of the shipbuilding yard

at Abden, Kinghorn, so long in the possession of John Key & Sons, engineers, being started on a new footing. In connection with this an engineering firm from here is spoken of as likely to enter the shipbuilding trade. At present there is only one vessel on the stocks and she is almost ready for launching. So unless something of this nature takes place, the yard will be at a complete standstill". We have a suspicion that this is the first inkling of a proposal, put to Robert Douglas of Douglas & Grant, which we cover later and was reported in the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* of the 24th October. It certainly seems as if someone was anticipating an outcome which did not come to pass.

Bad news poured from one of the pages, but not on some others, in the *Fife Free Press* on the 6th September 1884. There were three items under different headings. Under the heading **Dullness in Engineering Trade:-** "We understand that a large number of hands have this week been discharged by John Key & Sons, Whitebank Engine Works. There is a general dullness in this branch of the trade all over the district, and unfortunately many skilled artisans are out of employment. Let us hope that the dawn of brighter days is not far away".



DULLNESS IN THE ENGINEERING TRADE.—
We understand that a large number of hands have this week been discharged by Messrs John Key & Sons, Whitebank Engine Works. There is a general dullness in this branch all over the district, and unfortunately many skilled artizans are out of employment. Let us hope that the dawn of brighter days is not far distant.

So it is not just the shipyard which is suffering. The headline *Large Boilers* concerns – “The boiler for the new steamer recently launched at Kinghorn by Messrs Key, and now being fitted out at Leith were towed over the Firth this week. The boilers are the largest, we believe, which have ever been constructed at Kirkcaldy, weighing 45 tons each. They were brought down the branch line to the harbour by a steam wagon specially built for the Forth Bridge Castings, and were successfully tipped, one on Wednesday and the other on Thursday over the quay. This must be one of the last sizeable items manufactured by John Key & Sons as the workmen were being paid off.

On another page there was more ‘meat on the bone’ from the item which had been published on the 16th August. It

KINGHORN SHIPBUILDING YARD—PROPOSED LIMITED COMPANY.—The prospectus has been issued in connection with a limited company which is being formed to acquire the engineering and shipbuilding works at Kirkcaldy and Kinghorn, as presently occupied by Messrs **John Key & Sons.** The capital is £45,000 in

appeared that there was real hope when we read in the *Fife Free Press* of the 6th September under:-

Kinghorn Shipbuilding

Yard – Proposed Limited Company that “the prospectus has been issued in connection with a limited company which is being formed to acquire the shipbuilding and engineering works at Kinghorn and Kirkcaldy, as presently occupied by Messrs. John Key & Sons. The capital is £45,000 in 4,500 shares of £10 each (of which it is not intended to call up more than £8 per share).

“Mr James Pollard, C.A., Edinburgh, has examined the Messrs. Key’s books from the commencement of the present firm and reports that, during the first two years of the present firm certain concessions were made to customers involving losses upon three ships of £20,000, while to meet the increasing demands of the business the firm erected additional works at a cost of fully £14,000. On the other hand, during the last two years the firm’s profits have been at a rate of £7,000 per annum. It is believed that with the advantages which sufficient capital would give, the profits of the business would be greatly increased, but even if the future profits were to amount to only half that sum there would be an available dividend of 10% on the paid up capital of the company.

“John Norman of Messrs. John Norman & Co (the well-known engineering and shipbuilders in Glasgow) estimate the value of the engine works, shipbuilding yard and plant at £42,954, while the price paid by the company for the whole, including good will, is only £20,000.

Mr George A. Key, the senior partner of Messrs. John Key & Sons, under whose immediate supervision the business has hitherto been conducted, and through whose personal influence and reputation as a shipbuilder the present valuable connection of the firm has been acquired and has agreed to join the board after the flotation of the company

and to continue to take the personal superintendence for a reasonable rate of remuneration”.

The article then outlined that from the monies raised by the flotation - £20,000 was the purchase price with £5,000 for materials which would leave £20,000 for working capital.

It ended with – “An impression, we understand, perhaps, that the necessary capital for the undertaking will be raised, and that Key Shipbuilders, and the extensive engine works in Kirkcaldy so long carried on by Messrs Key, will soon again be in full swing”.

What is to be made of this turn of events? The names of the proposed directors are not mentioned, so, we can assume that it was not *Douglas and Grant* who disclosed the information. Equally certain is that there seems little or no hope of George A. Key fulfilling his July offer under his own steam if he is hawking the venture around Kirkcaldy looking for partners.

The Fife Herald on the 15th October reported an offer had been made to purchase the trust estate. The drawback was that the offer was only four shillings in the pound (20p).”It is doubtful if this will be accepted, a feeling is now prevalent that everything will come down to the hammer”. There is no information to suggest who made this particular rejected offer.

The Dundee Evening Telegraph of the 24th October 1884 gave rise to optimism, when it reported that rumours abounded in both Kirkcaldy and Kinghorn that the shipyard and the engineering works might reopen. It appeared that a limited company was being formed for this purpose. It has to be assumed that this is one and the same as was mentioned in August. Research led us to Dundee and we have to thank Dr Kenneth Baxter of the *University of Dundee Archives* for his assistance. It transpires in 1884 George A. Key, the senior partner, had made a suggestion to Robert Douglas, of *Douglas and Grant*, that he should purchase the sequestrated firm of John Key & Sons and amalgamate them with his own company (Douglas and Grant). The suggested name was the *Kinghorn and Dunnikier Shipbuilding and Iron Foundry Ltd.* Robert Douglas had been the trustee involved in the 1879 sequestration of Key & Sons, and for whatever reason, the proposal did not go ahead. The four page memorandum was also seen by Lewis Grant who marked on it, under his initials

– destroy- clearly this did not happen. What is absolutely certain is that the information in this memorandum is the source of the August report even quoting the reports of Messrs Pollard and Norman. The difficulty was that the

Memorandum of Robert Douglas, Engineer, Kirkcaldy, with reference to proposed amalgamation of the Business of J. Key & Sons, Shipbuilding & Engineering at Forth, and Douglas & Grant, Engineers, Dundee, and Dundee Foundry, Kirkcaldy.

The following proposition has been laid before me by Mr Douglas, Engineer, Dundee, in relation of the new business of J. Key & Sons:-

That I should purchase their Engineering and Shipbuilding Works, amalgamate them with my own business, and form a limited company with myself as Managing Director to work the two businesses as one under the name of - J. Key & Sons, Dundee, & Dundee Foundry, Kirkcaldy.

The business of J. Key & Sons is at present in liquidation but an arrangement has just been concluded between Mr G. J. Key and the creditors of the late firm for a settlement:-

Mr Pollard, C. A. of Edinburgh has made an investigation into the affairs of J. Key & Sons, and from information I have received from him I gather the following facts:-

They have been in business for four years and when they began they had only the small ready money capital of £4,000.

Their first three contracts were unfortunately being done outside for one owner. The firm having no building facilities were entirely in the hands of others they were doing work for, and in order to meet pressing engagements they were induced to give various advantages for instalments paid in advance on orders in course of execution; this I should almost certainly be a

of £20,000. Since then and during the time they were building these vessels they got several orders from business owners which proved profitable, and during the last 12 months they built a succession of seven steamers for the Admiralty, all of which proved profitable, so much so that the total on their 3 last contracts were made up. During the four years however the firm spent in improving their works a sum of £14,000, in fact double the productive capacity of their vessels. The sum so spent in improving their works, vessels, &c. represents their present deficiency. The shipyard had now four large building slips, and during 1873 they launched several steamers from their slips at a charge of 9,000 tons, and their money balance in that year was £100,000. The ship had facilities for building steamers up to 4,000 tons, and the engine works can turn out the largest size of marine engines. Mr Pollard is satisfied that the business is a good one, and if carried on with sufficient capital would be very profitable. He mentions that it cost the firm during their four years £4,000 on account of having to pay for their materials by bills instead of cash.

The business of Douglas & Grant is well known to have been profitable for upwards of 25 years. The collection of the buildings, plant, &c. debts in trade of both firms will be carried by competent parties.

To carry out such a proposed amalgamation the following might be the financial position of matters:-

The business of J. Key & Sons can be purchased by me for £25,000, which I will take on entirely free of any for debts under 9,000 tons, and there will be about £2,000 worth of surplus in their works. Our tools and material in stock I would sell for £17,500 - an all a total sum of £42,500, as that a capital of say £100,000 with £25,000 called up would purchase the two concerns and leave a working cash.

Cash Capital of £37,500, less the expenses of formation. As a comparison with a similar Company, the Dundee & Glasgow Engineering Company have a paid up capital of £25,075 also, as shown by the last published Return, paid in 1873 six per cent, 1874, 1875, 1876, 1877, 1878, 1879, 1880, 1881, 1882 five per cent.

The great advantage of this proposal would be the having two distinct departments of Engineering Business, viz: Land work as already indicated done at Dundee Foundry, and the Marine work at J. Key & Sons which would help to ensure steady business, as if one department succumbed the other might be busy, and the plant in either department would be suitable for either kind of work. In the management of this combined business it is proposed that I take the general and financial management of the works, and that Mr Grant my partner would undertake the Engineering department assisted by Mr G. J. Key in the Marine work, and that Mr G. J. Key would take the Shipbuilding department. Mr G. J. Key's assistance at the present moment is comparatively little, but there are signs of our being revived, and at the moment there are exceedingly good prospects of immediate orders for high class vessels from distinguished owners for whom Messrs Key had already built five others.

Mr G. J. Key will be enabled by his friends' relations to pay fully £5,000 in the Company, and Mr Grant and myself would put in £5,000.

It is estimated that after payment of all working expenses, including salaries to Managing Director and Assistant Managers of Department, the business of J. Key & Sons would yield an annual clear revenue of £10,000.

While that of Dundee Foundry would yield £10,000.

Agreement to be paid on a paid-up capital of £100,000

If the scheme herein set forth should be considered practicable it would be embodied in a Prospectus, a Provisional Board of Directors would be formed, and subscriptions for shares would be promptly invited.

Robert Douglas
 J. Key & Sons
 Dundee Foundry
 Kirkcaldy
 1881

memorandum has no date

other than the year. It most certainly did not go ahead but at this stage no reason/reasons can be offered. It is also true to say that we will soon see George A. Key vanish from the scene.

The re-opening of the shipyard would have been excellent news as the same month had seen the men and apprentices employed at *Townsend Foundry* by Messrs Dales paid off. The Townsend Foundry had had a full order book, but as they were completed, fresh ones failed to materialise. Finding new orders for the town's engineers was proving problematic.

THE UNEMPLOYED.

THE TREASURER begs to acknowledge the following sums in aid of the above:—

| | |
|---|-----------------|
| Previously acknowledged, | £175 4 1½ |
| John Forrester, Esq., | 1 1 0 |
| Thomas Black, Esq., | 1 1 0 |
| By book, per Mr Charles Forsyth, from Pathhead Spinning Mill, | 0 10 3 |
| By book, per Mr David Moffat, from Tyrie Bleachfield, | 0 18 3 |
| By book, per Mr James Saunders, Kirkcaldy, Floorcloth Works, | 3 4 9 |
| By book, per Mr David Deas, from Beanochy Works, | 4 1 6 |
| By book, per Mr Peter Macfarlane, from Messrs Nairn's Linoleum Works, | 2 2 4½ |
| Total, | £188 3 3 |

The *Fife Free Press* of the 18th had reported on the growing numbers of unemployed men in the district. They also mentioned “an example worthy of imitation is to be set up today by the workmen in the employment of the *Kirkcaldy Linoleum Company*. They have resolved to open a subscription for the unemployed in the district, and make their first contribution to the fund this morning”. It is heartening to report that the fund was indeed supported and the attached snippet from the *Fife Free Press* of the 6th December 1884 supports this statement. The £186, collected up to that point is worth circa £24,500 today.

The paddle steamer *Newcastle* was another example of where after her launch on the 21st August 1884 she was towed to Leith to have her engines and boilers fitted.

It was in the *Glasgow Herald* on the 6th November 1884 where we find lengthy details of her sea trials, furnishings and a celebratory lunch on board.

If it was to be the last ship built by John Key and Sons – it was certainly a fine way to finish. The various reports show the ship was built to a very high standard and could carry 170 first class passengers and 230 second class. The ship had wall panelling of various woods including;



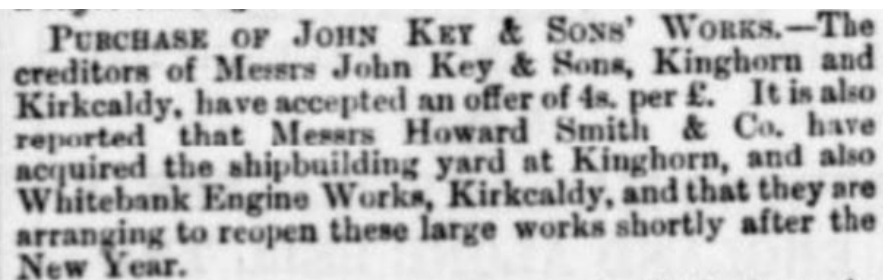
walnut, rosewood, satin, teak and oak. Many of the floors were covered by 'Lincrusta Walton' and pneumatic bells and speaking tubes gave communication throughout the ship. A dynamo powered up to 250 lights using the *Swan Incandescent Electric Light System*. The ship featured four steel boilers and two engines capable of producing 500hp. The ship had been built on behalf of the Newcastle Steamship company of New South Wales for trade between Sydney and Newcastle. The construction of her engines was supervised by a Mr Mathews who was to be her Chief Engineer. Captain W, Anderson, her Master, had overseen the final stages of her construction and he chaired the dinner which followed the trials. The meal was enjoyed in the salon where both Key brothers were in attendance along with Henry Barnet. The trustee Mr Harley was present but Cecil Bond is not mentioned as being a guest. The *Newcastle* underwent a change of ownership to the *Newcastle and Hunter River Steamship Co.* in 1892. The ship remained in service until being stripped and broken up in 1928, when she was intentionally shipwrecked at sea. In Australia, there was a certain impatience with the slow method of disposing of old ships. Instead of going to the scrap heap they are towed out to sea and sunk. The photograph shows the *Newcastle*, once one of the fastest ships on the



New South Wales coast, going down bow first, twenty miles off Sydney Heads, after two charges of dynamite had been used.

On the 22nd November it was reported that *Newcastle* was about to sail for Sydney. While she had been lying in Granton and Leith she was visited by a great number of people who “have most enthusiastically admired the completion of everything on board, especially the electrical arrangements. (*Fife Free Press*)

The *Fife Free Press* looked to be providing good news to end the year when in its edition of the 6th December it reported that:- The creditors of Messrs, John Key & Sons, Kinghorn and



PURCHASE OF JOHN KEY & SONS' WORKS.—The creditors of Messrs John Key & Sons, Kinghorn and Kirkcaldy, have accepted an offer of 4s. per £. It is also reported that Messrs Howard Smith & Co. have acquired the shipbuilding yard at Kinghorn, and also Whitebank Engine Works, Kirkcaldy, and that they are arranging to reopen these large works shortly after the New Year.

Kirkcaldy, have accepted an offer of 4 shillings in the £ (20p). It is also reported that Messrs.

Howard Smith & Sons have acquired the shipbuilding yard at Kinghorn and also the Whitebank Engine Works, Kirkcaldy, and they are arranging to re-open the large works shortly after the New Year”.

This potential purchaser was the firm based in Australia who as we know had ordered three ships, initially the *Keilawarra* and then, in 1883, the *Gabo* and the

THE STEAM FLEET OF WM. HOWARD SMITH & SONS, LIMITED.

Several of the vessels of the above splendid fleet having been built at Kinghorn, and fitted out at Kirkcaldy, and as when Kinghorn shipbuilding yard re-opens the name of Mr Howard Smith is likely to be a more familiar one in our midst than it is at the present time, our readers will peruse with interest the following particulars, extracted from the *Australasian Sketcher*, regarding the line of steamers with which his name is connected.

Among the large number of businesses which have silently grown up in our midst from comparatively small beginnings, perhaps none can be mentioned in the colonies in which there has been displayed more energy and enterprise than in that of the firm whose extensive fleet of steamers is represented in one of our illustrations. This enterprising company now own upwards of 25 vessels, including 16 passenger and cargo steamers, a powerful tug, one sailing vessel, and 7 lighters, one of which is provided with steam power.

Burwah from John Key & Sons. The firm was a genuine *New World* success story. Captain William H. Smith had first arrived in Australia in 1854 working his ship the *S.S. Express* along the coasts. By 1884 he had 31 vessels and had just altered the company to one of limited liability with capital of £1,000,000. Whatever the source of the rumour of this acquisition – it did not come to pass.

The year 1884 was seemingly to end with a classic glass half full/half empty report in the *Fife News* of the 20th December with:- “There is a feeling abroad that we are on the eve of a change and that trade is about to revive, though it is difficult to see upon what these hopes are founded. All the same, it is devoutly to be wished, that this may be the case. The failure to effect a settlement of the affairs of Messrs. John Key & Sons has somewhat deepened the gloom amongst ironworkers as it is feared that this will retard the reopening of these works for some time longer and in consequence a number of those who have been waiting in hope, have left the town to seek work elsewhere”.

However it looked as if the glass was substantially more than half full, when *The Fife Herald* of the 7th January 1885 did carry good news. It seemed there was every possibility that both the engine works and the shipbuilding yard would soon reopen. They had both been bought by John Scott, a shipbuilder from Aberdeen, from the sequestrated estate of John Key & Sons. The *Fife Free Press* of the 3rd January had

provided the same information which they claimed was from an 'undoubted source'.

Epilogue

It did indeed come to pass that John Scott purchased both the Whitebank Engine Works and Kinghorn Shipyard in 1885. His attempt to get the engine works on a secure footing failed and the manufacture of the engines was, probably, sensibly transferred to Kinghorn. The old Whitebank site was swallowed up by A.H. McIntosh of furniture fame.

Scott himself had many irons in the fire including building the block of flats on the south side of the junction of Victoria and Dunnikier Roads. He was also, for a time, the proprietor of the George Hotel on the High Street. He became immersed in financial difficulties and lost both. A.H. McIntosh & Co purchased the flats to house some of their workers.

The shipyard traded as *John Scott & Co.* until 1901 when financial issues forced him to set up a limited company, *Scott of Kinghorn Ltd.*, to raise much needed capital. This company continued until 1909 when it once more fell silent.



In 1919, a Montrose shipbuilder, John Fletcher, restarted the yard as *Kinghorn Shipbuilding Co. Limited*. He managed to

launch one ship before the last rivet was driven into the yard's coffin. The site was finally cleared in 1936 and is now a caravan site.

Fletcher's main claim to fame appears to have been that he bought *the Anchorage*, once the Kinghorn home of the novelist Annie S. Swan and was also living in *Inchdairnie Mansion House* when it burnt down in mysterious circumstances.



So ends this narrative which at one time was destined to cover the story of the shipyard from first to last. That plan was quickly derailed when the full extent of the herculean efforts of John Key and his sons became apparent.

Some interesting items which date from after the Key's involvement mark the finale of the story:-

There was an interesting article contained in the *Fifeshire Advertiser* of the 24th January 1885. The report indicated that Sydney newspapers had just come to hand and told of "intense excitement prevailed along the wharfs yesterday, owing to a race having been arranged between the A.S.N. Company's steamer *Cahors* and the Q.S.S. Company's steamer *Maranoa*". The race was from the wharf in Sydney to that of Brisbane. The *Maranoa* built by Denny of Dumbarton completed the course in 40 ½ hours but the John Key built *Cahors* was home in 39 hours.

With the above seemingly signifying a changing of the guard we find a report in the *Fifeshire Advertiser* of the 14th March 1885 relating to George A. Key and his brother:-“Old managers, foremen and officials lately connected with *Whitebank Engineering Works* and *Abden Shipbuilding Yard* met in the National Hotel with the purpose of doing honour to their late employer, Mr G. A. Key, previous to his sailing for Australia.”.

There had been 17 people around the table and they had enjoyed a “sumptuous meal purveyed in Mr Reekie’s best style”. After the meal had been completed and the various toasts made and drunk “George Key was presented with a very handsome meerschaum case containing all the requisites for a smoker. At the same time Alexander Key was presented with a similar smoking case.

“Both brothers feelingly thanked the donors and hoped that better times were in store for all parties in the future”.

The Fife News of the 8th December 1888 announced the marriage, on the 29th November, of John Balfour, Elmslea, Leven to Jessie MacLachlan Key, youngest daughter of the late John Key, Engineer and Shipbuilder.

The Fife Free Press of the 3rd October 1903 announced the death on the 29th September of Sarah Whyte in her 83rd year. The lady died in James Grove and as with her husband she was buried in the Old Kirk Graveyard. This seems perhaps an appropriate juncture to end the story.



All that now remains as a monument to ship building in Kirkcaldy is the former J. & C. Brown's small boat yard, west of the Tiel Burn, which is now used to sell cars.