

Turret Boats

Fred Landon

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Turret Boats

BY FRED LONDON

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To the ordinary observer, they looked like typical British tramp steamers when they appeared on the St. Lawrence River and Gulf just around 1900, and their like might have been seen then and later in the Suez Canal, in Oriental waters or wherever the commerce of the old British Empire had need of them. They might indeed have been seen flying the flags of other trading nations because of one radical change in their construction which reduced shipping costs.

They had come from the shipbuilding yards of William Doxford & Sons in Sunderland, England, a firm which had invented, and in 1891 patented, the type known in the trade as “turret boats.” The new principle in design was to cut away and reduce to a minimum those parts of the vessel most likely to be taxed (by harbor dues, etc., based on tonnage), while increasing space for handling and carrying cargo. Technically, and from a commercial point of view, the vessels had an exceedingly large dead-weight capacity, based on a small registered tonnage, in comparison with cargo vessels of the more general type.

But how was this very desirable end made possible? A few feet above the waterline the sides of the vessel curved inward instead of going straight up, thus forming a ledge or narrow deck along the side of the ship, usually known as the “harbor deck.” From this the sides of the vessel continued straight up in the customary manner, terminating in an upper deck of usual type for hatchways, bridge and ordinary deck fittings. The upper deck was, of course, very narrow—six-tenths of the beam of the vessel.

Turret-type vessels proved quite seaworthy. An ordinary vessel’s deck holds a lot of water but with the turret boat it must be heeling over at an extreme angle before water reaches the upper deck. The harbor deck being rounded and without any bulwark did not hold the water, which merely washed off. Harbor decks were also found useful for stowage of timbers in baulks which were easily packed on and when secured by chains suffered no

harm in the passage. The harbor deck ordinarily formed a sort of breakwater for the ship.^[1]

The first vessel of this novel type was given the simple name *Turret*, but some of those that came later had a second word, usually a noun, emphasizing their type. Thus, among the boats which came to Canada we find such names as *Turret Bay*, *Turret Bell*, *Turret Cape*, etc. The hundredth turret boat built in the Doxford yards bore the name *Whateley Hall*.

An average of ten boats a year seems to have been the output of the Doxford yards between 1894 and 1911. More modern types have since supplanted the “turrets” and of the seven which came to Canadian waters to carry coal between Sydney, Nova Scotia, and Montreal, not one now survives—the last one, the *Turret Cape*, being broken up at Port Dalhousie in 1959. War and weather and old age caught up with each of them and today they are only a memory.

The seven turret boats brought to Canada just around the turn of the century were the *Turret Bay*, *Turret Bell*, *Turret Chief*, *Turret Crown*, *Turret Court*, *Turret Cape* and one with a variation in name, the *Scottish Hero*. The *Turret Bay* was totally wrecked on St. Paul Island in the St. Lawrence River on May 20, 1904. The *Turret Bell*, which was either the 2nd or 3rd built by the Doxford yards, came to Canada in 1894 for the Turret Steam Shipping Co. (Peterson, Tate & Co.), who kept her until 1903. She was owned by T. Pratt until 1906 when she was reported wrecked and did not appear in *Lloyd's Register* between 1907 and 1912. In the latter year she first appeared in Canadian registry but with a changed name *Kaswind*. She was then owned by the Arctic Steamship Company of Quebec. Her career ended on March 11, 1917, when she was sunk by enemy action off the east coast of England.

Available data indicates that the seven turret boats which came to the St. Lawrence had all been built in the 1890's. Two had been wrecked in Canada but when the charter period ended the others passed into Canadian ownership, several to the Canadian Ocean and Inland Navigation Company (Sir Wm. Peterson & Co.). *The Turret Chief*, built in 1896, was one of those which passed to Peterson control in 1904 and during the “Great Storm” of November, 1913, she was numbered among the casualties, though happily without loss of life, when she stranded on the beach at the extreme point of Keweenaw, six miles east of Copper Harbor. A graphic account of the experiences of the crew was written by a wheelsman M. J. LaChapelle, and appeared in the *Midland County Free Press Herald* in 1951.^[2] According to

Mr. LaChapelle's narrative the afternoon of Friday November 8th, had displayed no indication of an impending storm, though after supper the wind steadily increased in volume and by midnight had reached a strength of 80 miles an hour. Tarpaulins were torn from the hatches and lashings from the booms while waves poured over the deck threatening to engulf the ship. Running lights had already disappeared when at 3:45 on Saturday morning the vessel struck a reef, bumped her way across it and settled in shallow water close to a steep rocky shore. The *Turret Chief* had been headed for Fort William and Captain H. J. Aitken (then on his first command) believed that they had been so driven off course that they were stranded on Isle Royale.

The first task was to get the crew ashore and this was accomplished by joining two ladders together and using this as a boom, raising and lowering it in motion with the waves as man by man was taken from the deck. Finally, all 16 were landed safely. Some wet food had been salvaged from the galley and when a fire was made and a crude shelter raised, a measure of hope came to the shipwrecked crew. They had no idea where they were and not until the third day did they discover that they were on Keweenaw Point and only six miles from Copper Harbor.

The *Turret Chief* had been badly damaged during the storm but in the following year she was hauled out of her precarious position and repaired at Port Arthur. In 1916 she was owned by the Entente Steamship Company (Leopold Walford, London, Ltd.). These owners changed her name to *Vickerstown* and sold her in 1923 to International Waterways Navigation, Ltd. of Montreal who renamed her *Jolly Inez*. On November 16, 1927, she stranded on a reef off Saddle Bag Island in Lake Huron. She was reduced to barge rig under the name of *Salvor* and was lost off Muskegon on September 26, 1930.

The *Turret Court*, also built in 1896, was in the hands of the Peterson interests from 1904 to 1915, but in 1916 was sold to the Turret Steamship Company of Halifax (Dominion Iron and Steel Company). Some time between 1924 and 1927 she went to the International Waterways Navigation, Ltd. of Montreal and in 1930 was reduced to barge rig, being used in salvage work by the Sincennes-McNaughton Line. In 1940 she was broken up at Hamilton by the Steel Company of Canada.

The *Turret Crown*, built in 1895, was owned in 1904 by G. M. Stamp and in 1915 by Turret Crown, Ltd. (H. W. Harding). She was sold in 1916 to Coastwise Steamship and Barge Co. of Vancouver, B.C., who sold her in 1918 to Commonwealth Steamship Co. of Toronto. In 1921 she was sold to

W. J. and S. P. Herivel of London, England, and in 1924 to W. J. McCormick. On November 2, 1924, she stranded on Meldrum Point, Manitoulin Island.

The *Scottish Hero*, built in 1895 for the Scottish Hero Steamship Company, Ltd., Newcastle-on-Tyne, was later sold to the Peterson interests at Montreal, who, in 1916, sold her to the Hero Steamship Company of Halifax. On June 10, 1917, she was sunk by enemy gunfire 440 miles W. by S. of Cape Carbonara, Sardinia.

The *Turret Cape* was the last of the seven to disappear. Built in the Doxford yards in 1895, she arrived in Canadian waters in 1904. From that date until 1915 she was controlled by the Peterson interests at Montreal. In 1916 she was listed as owned by the Cape Steamship Company (Dominion Iron and Steel Co., managers), but during the 1930's she was reduced to barge rig. Purchased by the Robin Hood Flour Mills Company, her engines had been removed and she had become a tow barge. It might have been anticipated that her days were over. Her fate, however, was determined by World War II.

In the Spring of 1941, with the great struggle underway in Europe, the old barge lay at a dock at Port Colborne, Ontario, and was there seen by the agents of Saguenay Terminals, a Montreal shipping firm, who purchased the barge and towed her to Montreal, where she was reconditioned and received new Sulzer Diesel engines.

When this work was completed the vessel left Canada to engage in trade southbound to American ports but later was moved into Caribbean waters to carry bulk cargoes with occasional trips north to U.S. Atlantic ports. Wartime operations in the movement of bauxite used in the making of aluminum were considerable. The old *Turret Cape* (renamed in 1948 *Sun Chief*) on several occasions rendered assistance to other vessels which had been under enemy attack, and aided shipwrecked sailors. For this her master, Captain L. H. Dicks, was later awarded the O.B.E.

When the war ended, the *Sun Chief* continued to haul cargoes of bauxite between British Guiana and Trinidad but by this time she was about worn out and was finally laid up at Mobile Alabama. There she was seen by Scott Misener, of Sarnia Steamships, Ltd. and was purchased for trade on the Great Lakes where she had operated long before. The Misener Company gave her a new name. She became the *Walter Inkster*, named after a well-known Collingwood lake captain who had been a compass adjustor for three

decades. The new name appeared on the bow and the vessel was engaged in the grain trade out of Fort William for several years.

In the early Summer of 1949, when in Fort William, the writer had an opportunity to look up the old vessel and was taken over her by her French-Canadian captain. She was plainly showing the marks of the years and even some marks of her wartime experiences. Up in the pilot-house there were still manuals and charts for the navigation of Caribbean waters and through the low-set windows one could imagine her officers warily watching the horizon for enemy craft ready to pounce on their prey. The engines were said to be in second-rate condition and likely to need replacement. The Misener Company was even at that time giving serious thought to retiring the boat but it was ten years before she finally disappeared.

The last time that I saw her she was tied up at Port Dalhousie, awaiting the final decision to reduce her to scrap. This was in the Summer of 1959, when she became but a memory. A boy climbed the ladder leading to her deck and brought me down a couple of sailing manuals of Indian waters.

It is of interest to observe that the Doxford's invention and development of their turret boats almost coincided in point of time with Captain Alexander McDougall's building in America of his whaleback barges and steamers, more than forty in number, in the decade between 1888 and 1898. McDougall, of Scottish birth, but reared in Collingwood on the Georgian Bay, was a lake mariner of long experience. While captain of the *Hiawatha* and towing two barges up and down the Lakes, he conceived the idea of a boat that, when without cargo, would float on the water like a cigar with living quarters and engine-room perched on the stern. When the boat settled into the water, fully loaded, the deck was but seven or eight feet above the water's surface and the waves would often wash over the main deck. There was minimum resistance to both wind and sea.

I am greatly indebted to Mr. Ivan S. Brookes of Hamilton, Ontario, for many details of the seven English-built ships which served first as coal carriers between Sydney, Nova Scotia, and Montreal, but five of which were later engaged in trade on the Great Lakes. Four of these, the *Turret Cape*, *Turret Chief*, *Turret Court* and *Turret Crown*, were each 253 feet in length, with gross tonnage of over 1,800, net of over 1,100, and powered with triple-expansion engines built by the Doxford Company. The *Turret Bell*, the *Scottish Hero*, and probably the *Turret Bay* were 297 feet in length and of over 2,200 gross tonnage, with net tonnage just under 1,400. The *Scottish Hero* had quadruple engines and being somewhat larger than the others had to be cut in two in 1907 to bring her to the lake trade. Ten years later, with

World War II in progress she was again cut in two at Ashtabula and returned to Montreal. When again commissioned, the old boat was loaded with supplies for Britain but fell victim to a German submarine on her first voyage. Mr. Brookes lacks definite data on the *Turret Bay* but says that the triple-expansion engines of the *Turret Bell* were built by George Clark, Ltd. of Sunderland, England, possibly a subsidiary of the Doxford firm.

It is worthy of note that two of the original seven turret boats were lost at sea by enemy action during World War II and that a third, the *Turret Cape* (*Sun Chief*), successfully evaded enemy threats while operating on Caribbean waters and bore the scars until she was finally scrapped in 1959. Her register was closed on September 15th of that year.

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- [1] See Frank H. Mason, *The Book of British Ships*. London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1911, pp. 265-67.
- [2] Issues of November 10, 17, and 24. This newspaper was published at Midland, Ontario, the well-known Georgian Bay port.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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[The end of *Turret Boats* by Fred Landon]