

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE



CAPTAIN WILLIAM COPPIN (1805-1895): engineering entrepreneur

Captain William Coppin was the remarkable and innovative sailor and engineer who, more than anyone else, established Derry's 19th century shipbuilding industry - at one time the largest in Ireland.

Born in Kinsale, Co Cork, he trained as a shipwright and at age 17 went to the Canadian port of St John, New Brunswick to work for a relation who owned a shipbuilding firm. That port was where most of Derry's fleet was built and a "St John ship" was a guarantee of top class workmanship. So Coppin was in the best place to learn quality in design and construction. In 1829 he built his first ship, the 101 ton *Kathleen*.

Skilled also in navigation, he commanded many ships to the Caribbean where he met Derry merchants. One of these, John Kelso, ordered a ship for the timber trade. This was the *Edward Reid* which Coppin built and sailed to Derry in a speedy 19 day voyage across the Atlantic in 1831. This led to Coppin being offered the command of the *Prudence*, a passenger ship between Derry and Philadelphia which he captained for three years until he moved to captain the *Queen Adelaide* ferry between Derry and Liverpool. When he took command in 1835 of the company's sister ferry the *Robert Napier* he reduced the sailing time between Derry and Liverpool from 21 to 18 hours.

In 1839 he bought Skipton's shipyard at Strand Road and went back to building ships. His first ship, the *City of Derry* on its maiden voyage from Liverpool to Madras, India, achieved a record time of 104 days.

In 1840 he opened a foundry and engineering works to make engines and boilers and enlarged the slipway to take ships of up to 700 tons. With 500 employees it was the largest shipyard in Ireland at the time. In 1840 he built the *Barbara* for local businessman Daniel Baird & Co to serve the sugar trade from Mauritius and Puerto Rico. In 1841 ten thousand people gathered to watch the launch of the *Maiden City* at Strand Road.

Coppin's most famous vessel was the *Great Northern* launched in July 1842 - at 1,750 tons, 220 feet long and with a 370-horsepower engine, the largest screw-propelled steamship in the world. He wanted the Government to buy or lease it and its maiden voyage took the huge ship to London's East India Dock where it was the object of general astonishment. But neither the Admiralty nor any other customer took the vessel and it was eventually sold for scrap to pay the London harbour dues. Coppin himself had invested £45,000 in the ship.

Coppin went on to build four smaller paddle steamers. After 1846 he started out on a new business strategy of ship repair and salvage which proved surprisingly profitable, saving 140 sunken or grounded ships.

In 1873 Coppin sold his shipyard and moved to live in Sackville Street where died in 1895 aged 90 years. "Throughout his life", wrote Gerald Hasson in *Thunder and Clatter*, Guildhall Press's history of Derry shipbuilding, "he was a man of ideas, bursting with energy and a self-belief that verged on arrogance". Those are, of course, two of the qualities of an entrepreneur - "without him there may never have been a shipbuilding industry in Derry".

[Ref: "Captain William Coppin" by A Malley & M McLaughlin 1992].