



Unloading Timber at Millbay using Pearce's 'Plymouth Gear'  
 Associated British Ports Collection, Southampton City Heritage



Two of Millbay's 0-6-0 'Saddle Tank' shunting locomotives, c1930s  
 Courtesy Dave Newband: The Fisher Collection



Cargo Handling at Millbay  
 Associated British Ports Collection, Southampton City Heritage



Unloading mail by hand from the *Sir Francis Drake*, March 1926  
 Associated British Ports Collection, Southampton City Heritage



The newly installed electric conveyor for unloading mail sacks, 1927  
 Plymouth Library Services



*Sunny Girl* along side the liquid gas terminal, North Quay, 1978

Plymouth Library Services

## Cargo & Trade

Millbay soon became Plymouth's main cargo dock, overtaking historic Sutton Harbour. Until the Second World War it also handled a larger tonnage than Cattedown Wharves, a younger local rival. Grain ships, along with some other cargo ships, continued to use the Docks throughout the 1980s.

Imports were always greater than exports - with grain, then timber and coal, mostly topping the list. In the 1870s other imports included sugar cane, guano and nitrate of soda. For many years coasting companies like Clyde Shipping, British & Irish and, later, Coast Lines called regularly - with ships sailing to Scotland, Liverpool, London, Belfast, Dublin and other ports en route.

European trade has remained important. Imports in the 1890s included Spanish cattle and eggs, along with potatoes, broccoli, peas and strawberries from France. Today these trading links are maintained by Brittany Ferries - the goods now mostly arriving at Millbay by the lorry load, ready for distribution.

### In 1884

"I closely inspected the appliances, warehouse, lairs, &c ...I may fairly confess myself to be impressed and in some measure astonished by what I saw. ...The scene was a busy one. Ships were discharging and receiving, others towing out ...and what with the rattling of steam cranes, the blowing of locomotives..."

W. C. Russell, 'English Channel Ports', 1884

### GWR Fish

Sutton Harbour is Plymouth's fishing harbour but Millbay had occasional involvement. Dried fish was imported from Newfoundland and, in the 1890s, fresh fish too arrived at Millbay; some carried by rail from Cornish ports, some landed at the Dockside. Handcarts of 'GWR Fish' were wheeled across Plymouth to be sold at Sutton Harbour, much to the annoyance of Barbican fishermen. Trawlers returned to Millbay in the 1960s, 70s and 80s - these were large factory trawlers or seasonal visitors, some unloading catches, some taking-on stores.

### Bullion

Millions of pounds worth of bullion was regularly handled at Millbay, arriving from Australia, the Cape, West Africa and the United States. Gold shipments from Plymouth to New York were common, especially just before the Second World War.

Between 1932 and 1934 over £1m worth of gold and silver ingots and sovereigns was landed at Millbay - salvaged from the Peninsula & Oriental liner *Egypt* which sank off France in 1922.

### Timber

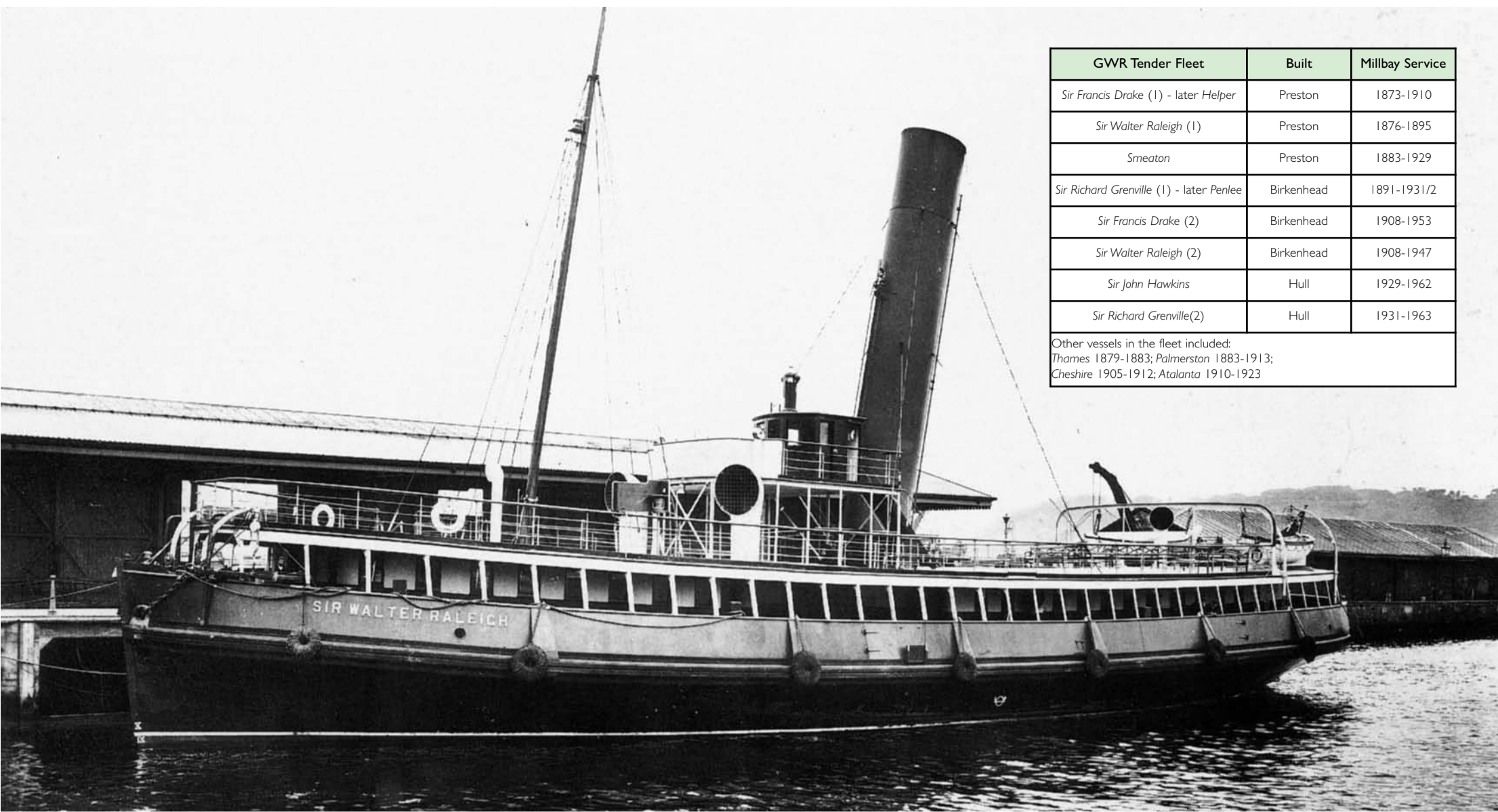
This trade was mainly based on the East Quay and Jewsons, Cole Brothers and Reeves & Fox Elliott are the businesses many still remember. Imports came from the Baltic and, occasionally, Canada and South America. Millbay Docks employee Cyril Pearce invented lifting gear which doubled the amount that could be rigged and unloaded in a day. This became known as 'Pearce's' or 'Plymouth Gear'.

### Some Other Post-War Cargoes

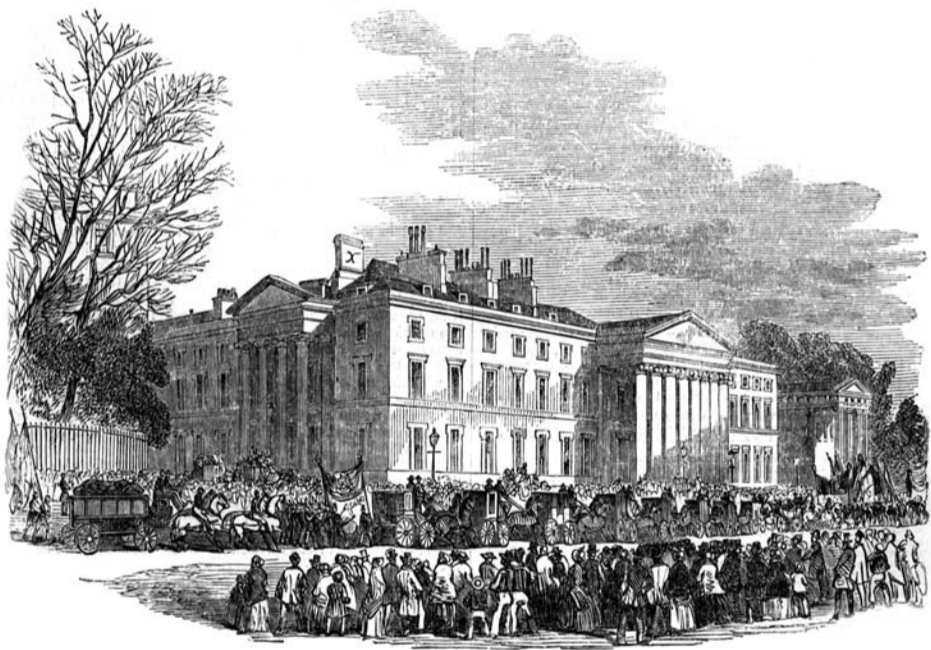
Grain continued to be landed at the West Wharf silo and processed at Spiller's Mill north of the Docks. Coal was landed at the South Quay, for the Co-op, and Clyde Shipping called regularly at Clyde or Glasgow Quay until 1966. Animal feed, farm machinery, fruit, paper and salt were among the imports. In the 1970s, as Millbay tried to diversify its trade, scrap metal was loaded for export and small tankers delivered liquid gas to a terminal on the North Quay.

GWR Tender Fleet	Built	Millbay Service
Sir Francis Drake (1) - later Helper	Preston	1873-1910
Sir Walter Raleigh (1)	Preston	1876-1895
Smeaton	Preston	1883-1929
Sir Richard Grenville (1) - later Penlee	Birkenhead	1891-1931/2
Sir Francis Drake (2)	Birkenhead	1908-1953
Sir Walter Raleigh (2)	Birkenhead	1908-1947
Sir John Hawkins	Hull	1929-1962
Sir Richard Grenville(2)	Hull	1931-1963

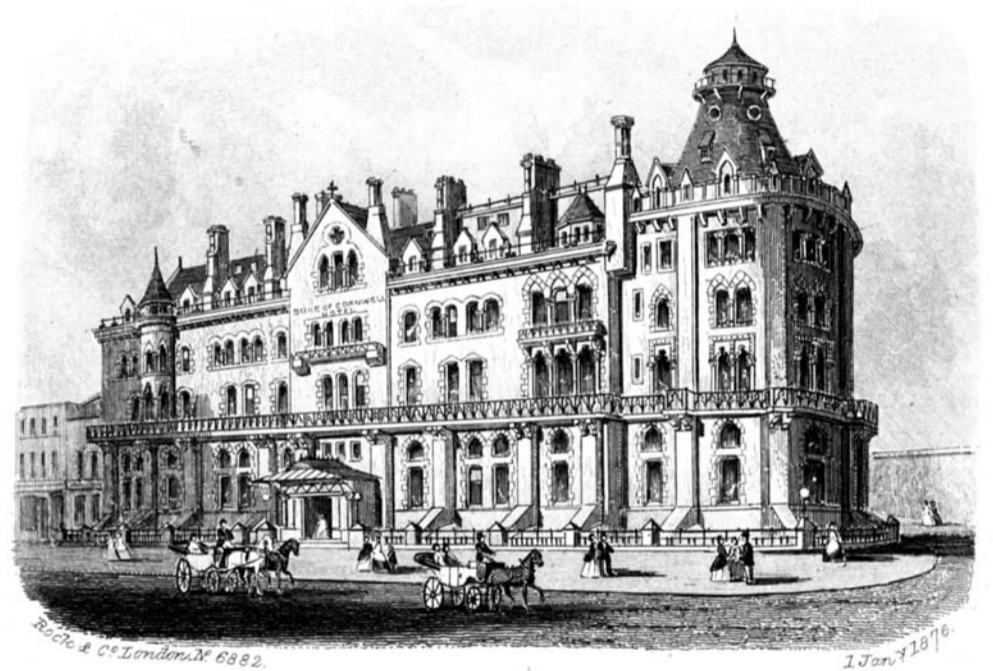
Other vessels in the fleet included:  
 Thames 1879-1883; Palmerston 1883-1913;  
 Cheshire 1905-1912; Atalanta 1910-1923



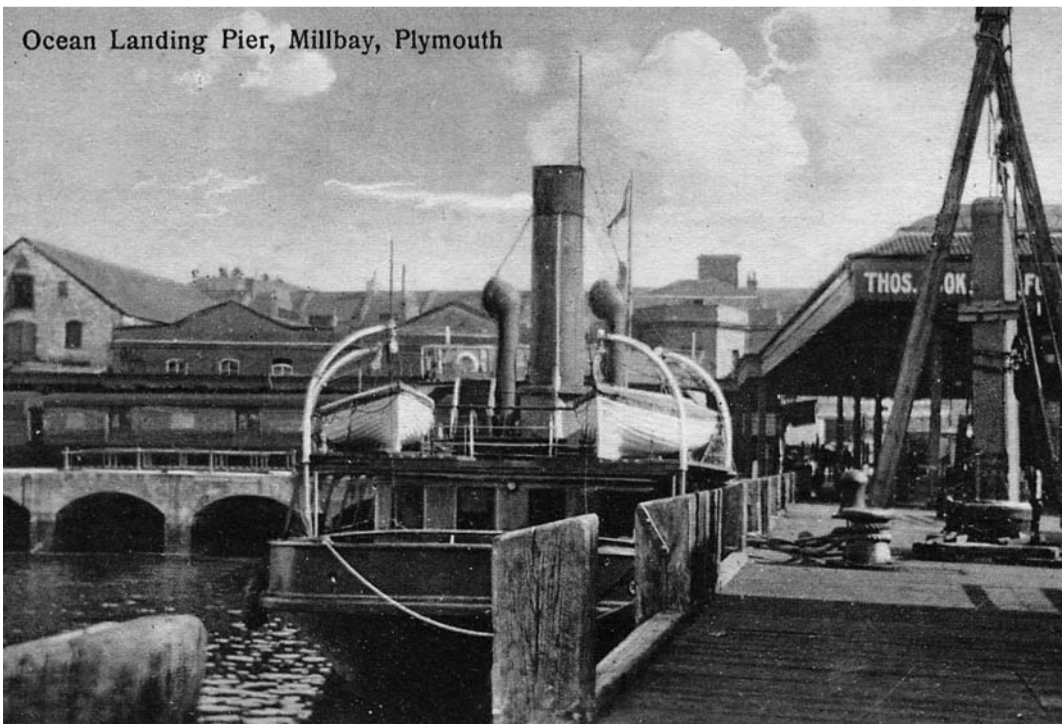
The new tender *Sir Walter Raleigh* arrives at Millbay, 1908  
 Photograph British Railways: Private Collection



Celebrations in Plymouth to mark the arrival of the *Bosphorus*, 1850  
 'Illustrated London News', 28 December 1850: Plymouth Library Services



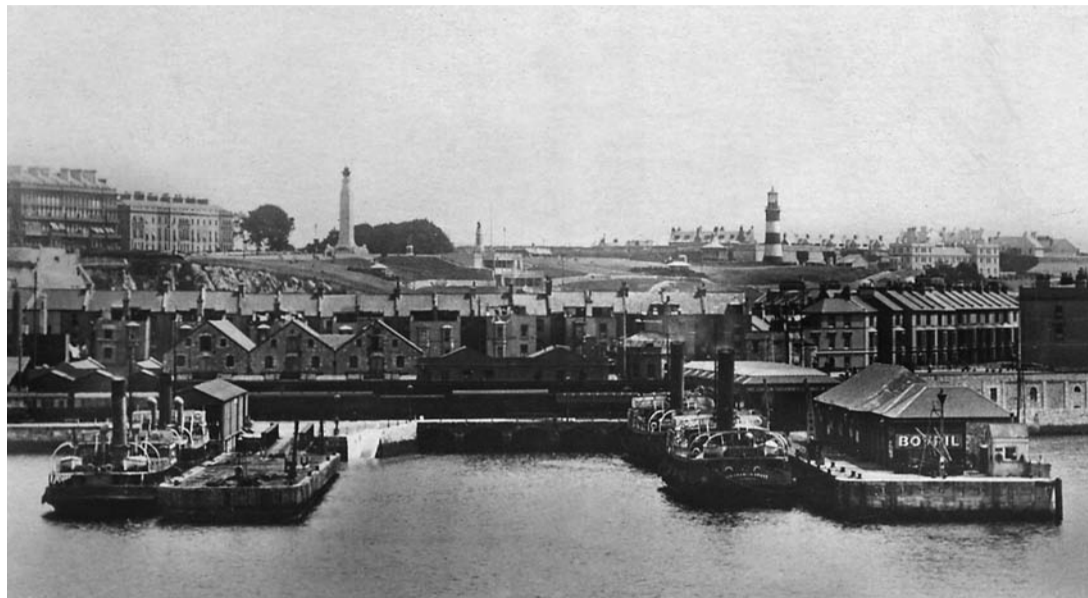
The Duke of Cornwall Hotel, pictured c1876  
 Convenient to passengers travelling via Millbay Docks and station.  
 Plymouth Library Services



Liner tender alongside Millbay Pier, c1905  
 Courtesy: The Fisher Collection



GWR Tender at Millbay Pier with 'Ocean Special' waiting, c1912  
 Courtesy: Bob Cook Collection



Ocean Landing Piers at Millbay, c1925  
With four liner tenders alongside. Courtesy: The Fisher Collection

## Ocean Landing Pier

There was great celebration when the General Steam Shipping Company's vessel *Bosphorus* docked at Millbay Pier on 16 December 1850, collecting mail for the South African Cape. Plymouth was finally a mail steam packet port - a role that would continue for over 100 years.

The Town was already established as a port-of-call for ships carrying emigrants overseas. Between 1840 and 1890 large numbers of assisted emigrants were embarked from a depot near Sutton Harbour to join ships in the Sound or the Cattewater. The new ocean mail steamer trade was based at Millbay - though visiting ships soon speeded their call by anchoring in the Sound.

From the 1870s a fleet of tenders were based at the Docks to carry passengers and mail from ship to shore. This trade centred on the Millbay and Princess Royal Piers. Ocean liner calls reached their peak in 1930s, but never recovered after the War. The last mail and passengers were handled at Millbay in October 1963.

### At the Quayside

In 1850-1 the railway had been extended from Millbay Station to the dockside, where a Custom House, the Pier Hotel and passenger facilities had been built. In 1883-4 the facilities were described thus, "...handsome and well furnished waiting and retiring rooms, and a baggage warehouse. Telegrams can be dispatched, letters written and posted; there is also the convenience of an interpreter, and the railway carriages are brought abreast of the building...".

### New Hotels

In 1862-3 a group with interests in the railway built the Duke of Cornwall Hotel near Millbay to serve the Docks. The Continental and the Albion Hotels (now the New Continental) opposite opened soon after - merging in 1904. The Grand Hotel, overlooking the Hoe, opened in c1879. By the 1880s the original Pier Hotel housed shipping agents' offices.

### The 1930s

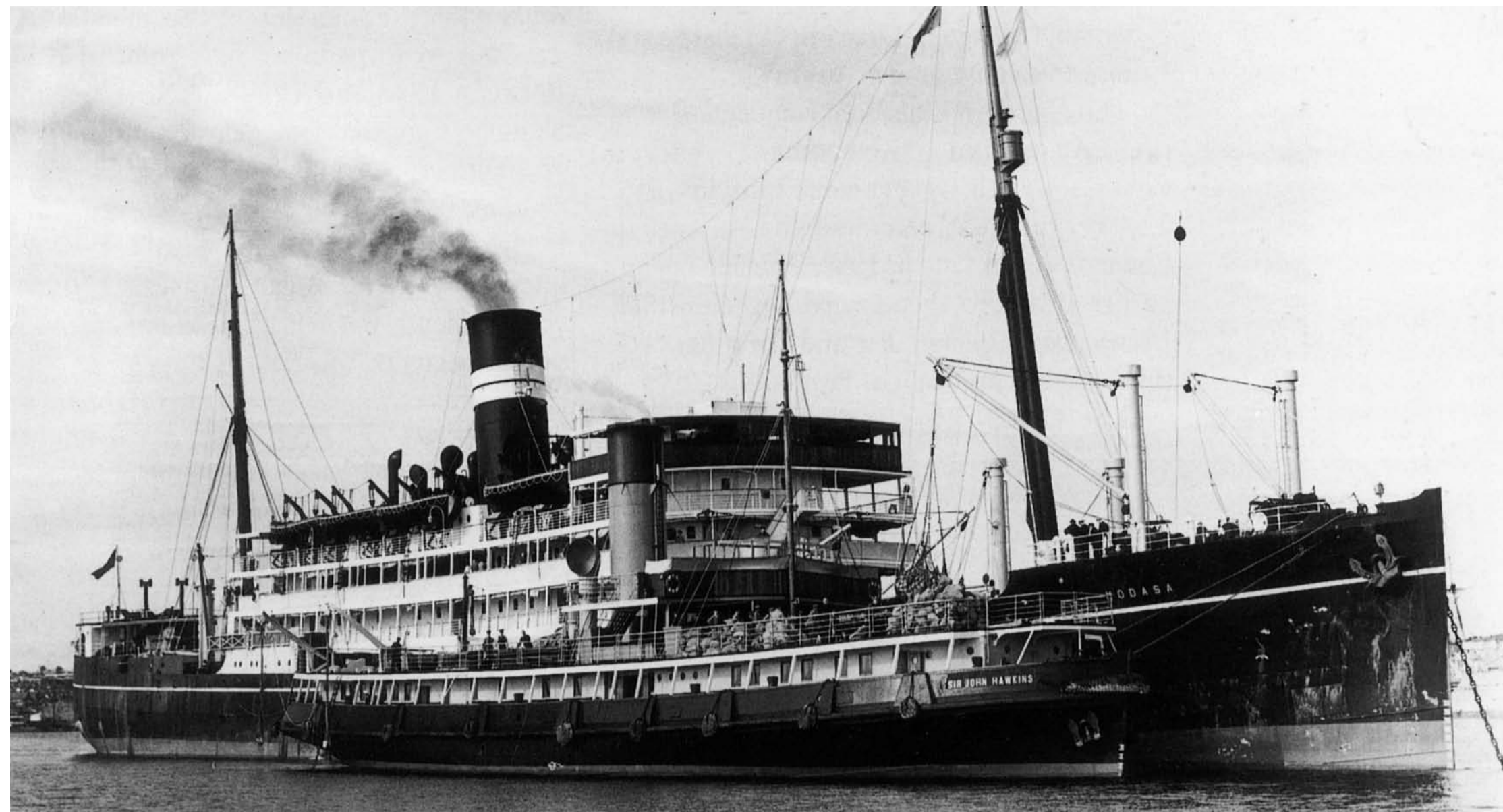
Ocean mail and passenger traffic passing through Plymouth in 1930 totalled 682 vessels calling inbound and 106 outbound. Over 41,000 passengers and almost 308,000 mailbags were handled at Millbay Docks. This was the best-recorded year for passengers. In 1938 it was claimed 1 in 9 sea passengers arrived in the UK via Plymouth. The GWR 'Ocean Express' trains that ran from Millbay to Paddington, London, included new Pullman carriages and purpose built baggage and sorting vans.

### The GWR Tender Fleet

Local tugs and small ferries were hired to serve visiting mail ships until the 1870s, when the Dock Company introduced their first tender - the *Sir Francis Drake* (1). The best remembered Plymouth tenders were all named after famous Elizabethan seafarers. The *Sir Francis Drake* (2) was scrapped in Plymouth. The last two, *Sir John Hawkins* and *Sir Richard Grenville* (2), were withdrawn in the early 1960s.

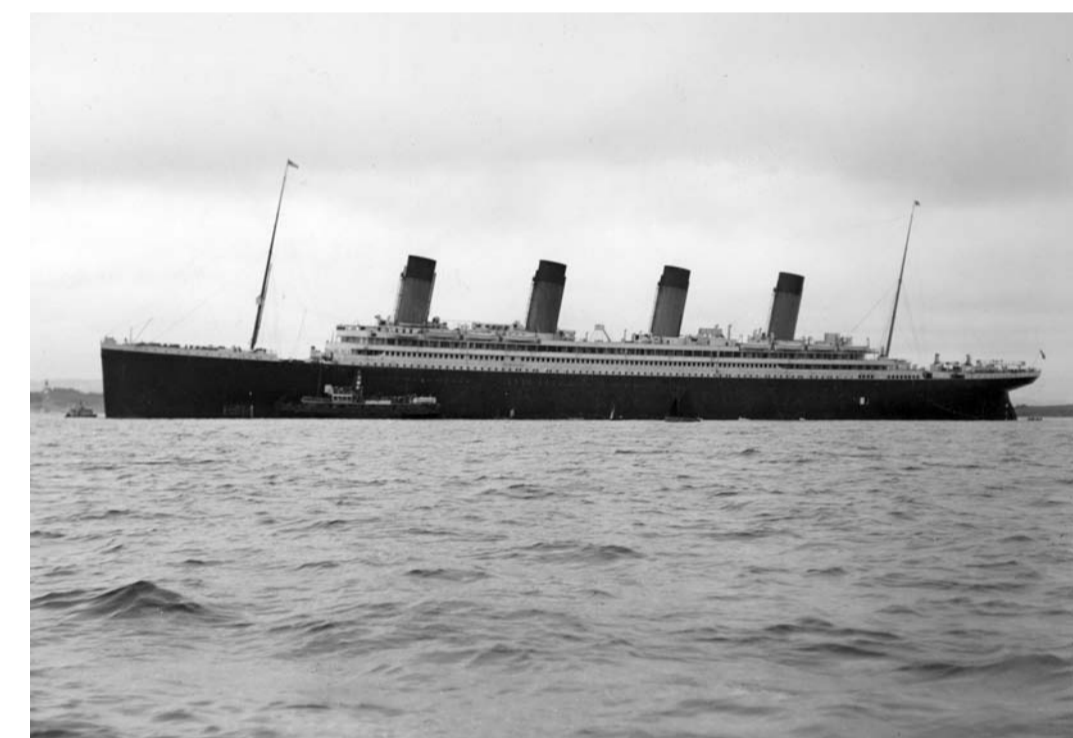


Passenger Waiting Room at Millbay, as refitted in 1936  
Associated British Ports Collection, Southampton City Heritage



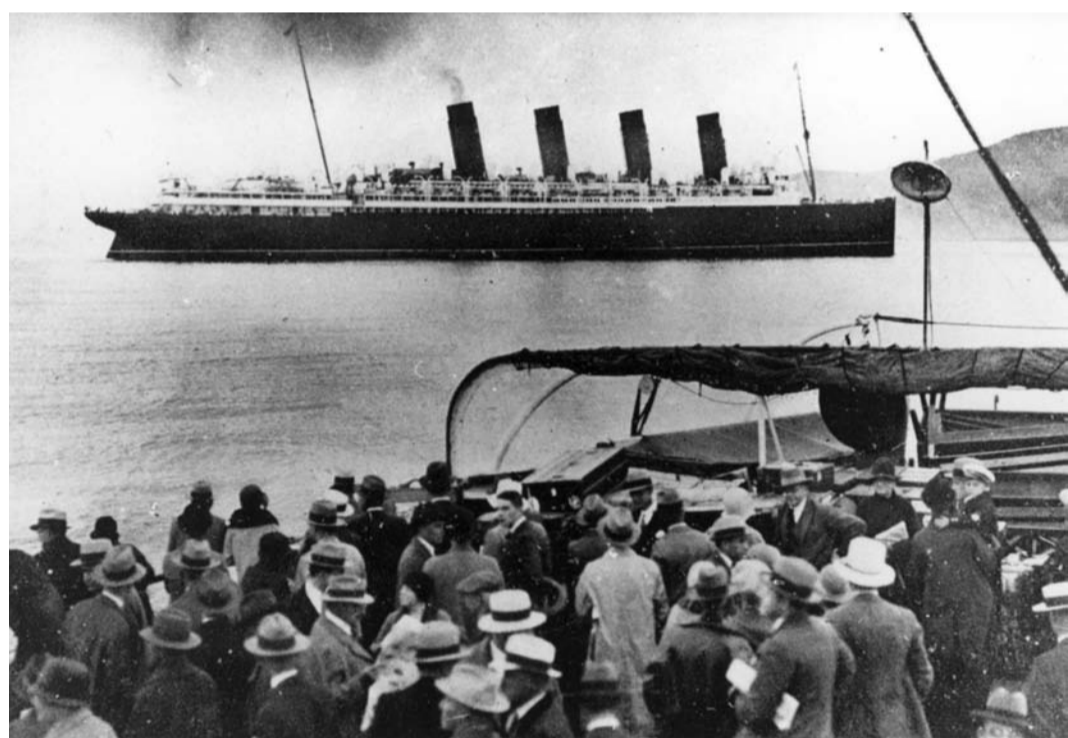
British India liner *Modasa* in Plymouth Sound with the GWR tender *Sir John Hawkins* in the 1930s  
Liners were usually attended by more than one tender, carrying passengers and mail separately.

Associated British Ports Collection, Southampton City Heritage



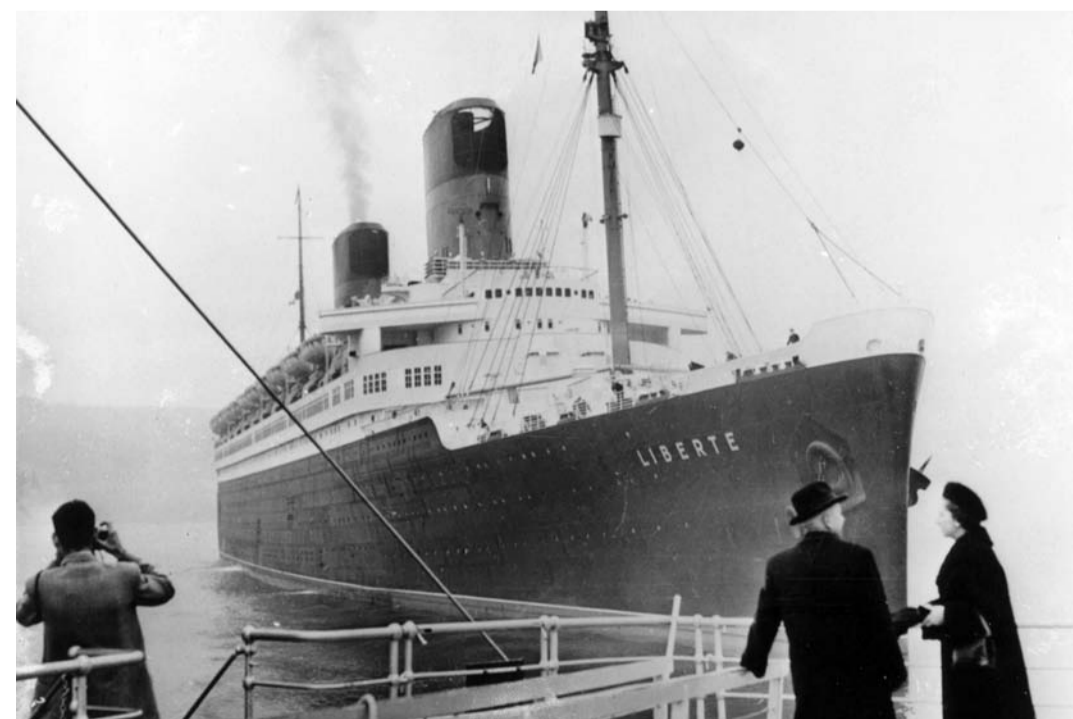
White Star Liner *Olympic* at Cawsand Bay, Plymouth, 24 August 1912  
Just four months after the sinking of her sister ship *Titanic*.

PCMAG Collection



The *Mauretania* in Cawsand Bay, viewed from a GWR tender, 1928

Courtesy: Norman Hine Collection



French Liner *Liberté* departing Plymouth for the last time, 1961

PCMAG Collection



French Line's 'Blue Riband' holder *Normandie* at Plymouth, June 1935  
One of her few visits. The ship was destroyed by fire at New York in 1942.

Courtesy: Norman Hine Collection