

Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

HEYSHAM HARBOUR

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 92

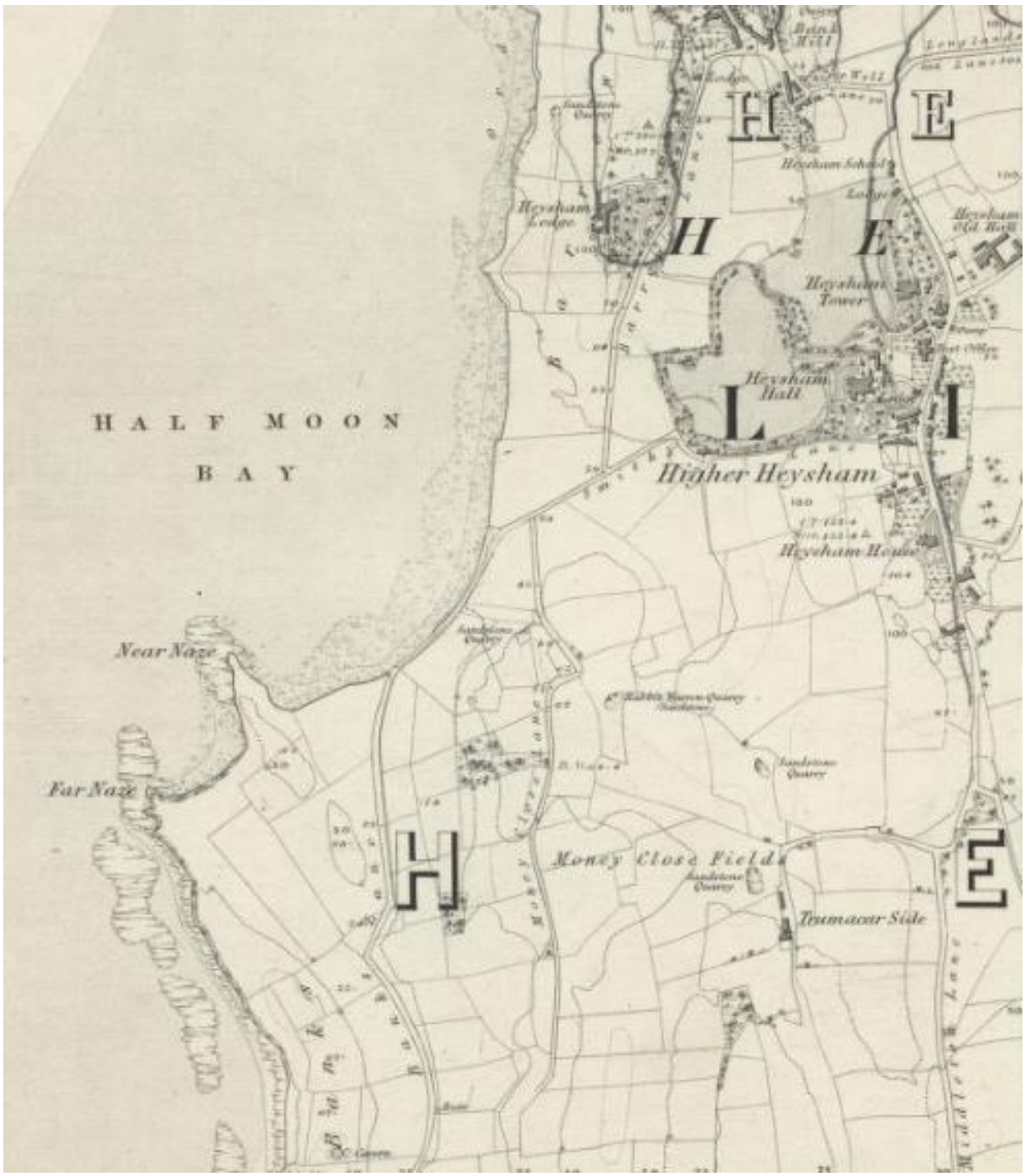
Ports are enticing locations for railway companies seeking to secure more inbound and outward-bound passenger and freight traffic. Some railways went so far as to build their own ports. The Midland Railway company did just this with Heysham Harbour.

For the Midland Railway the target was the Irish Sea trade to Dublin and particularly to Belfast. They already had access to Liverpool Docks, but the voyage from there to Belfast was a long and slow one.

In 1871 the Midland Railway formally took over the 'Little' North Western Railway, which by 1850 had opened a line from Leeds, via Skipton, Settle Junction and the Lune valley to Lancaster and Morecambe. This line gave the Midland access to the developing harbour at Morecambe – the 'Old Pier', now the 'Stone Jetty'. The problem with this harbour was that the jetty was so tidal that it precluded a regular timetabled service of sailings.

The main competitor for the northern Irish Sea crossings was the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway from its harbour at Fleetwood. Originally the Midland Railway looked at using Barrow-in-Furness as its base but later decided to build a new harbour fully under its control at Heysham.

This gave a short sea route, easy land access for new railway lines and quick access via the deep channel called 'Heysham Lake' to open waters, unlike Fleetwood which had a tortuous and silting approach for larger ships. Additionally a harbour at Heysham, though on the highly tidal Morecambe Bay, could be open at all stages of the tide.



The site of Heysham Harbour before construction began, south of Heysham village
(Source: Ordnance Survey 6-inch map 1844)

The construction of the harbour was a major undertaking costing the large sum of £3 million at the time. Planning began in 1891 and Acts of Parliament were obtained in 1892, 1895 and 1896.

A 350-acre site was purchased south of Heysham village and it was linked to the railway network just east of Morecambe in 1898. The main contractor, Price and Wills, completed the work in 1904.

Long seawalls and breakwaters were built around the whole site. The 36-acre harbour was dug out, protected by a temporary brick wall seaward until ready. A minimum depth of 17 feet even at low

tides was provided. Quays were built on the north and south sides. A quarry was opened nearby to provide some of the building stone needed.

A reservoir was constructed to store the water pumped up 100 feet from an aquifer to meet the harbour's operational needs. A power station was built to power what was claimed to be the world's first all-electric harbour.

There were two large storage sheds for goods traffic and a railway station big enough for long passenger express trains. Cattle and horses from Ireland were off-loaded separately and kept in an extensive harbour-side lairage before onward movement.

There were numerous cranes and extensive railway sidings. A small fish quay was built on the north side.

Despite extensive use of steam-powered diggers there was a large workforce of up to 2000 men some of whom were housed in temporary camps on site, nicknamed Klondyke and Dawson City after the gold-rush towns of those names in Yukon, Canada. The North Quay was for heavy cargos and was the base for the harbour's dredgers.

The main traffic was at the South Quay. The railway from the Harbour to Morecambe and Lancaster was electrified in 1908, initially using current from the Harbour's power station. Ferry traffic from Morecambe Pier ceased when Heysham Harbour opened.

The main traffic was daily ferry services to Belfast and Dublin and twice weekly to Londonderry. Using faster ships the journey time was quicker than the competitor service from Fleetwood.

Other cargoes grew for local industries such as Williamson's Lune Mills (raw materials for linoleum production) and ore for the Carnforth iron works. Early silting problems were largely cured by building a new south jetty.

In 1923 the many private railway companies in Great Britain were amalgamated into four large ones. The result of this was that in 1928 the longstanding service from Fleetwood to Belfast transferred to Heysham and four new (*Duke of*…) boats came into service.



Heysham Harbour in 1938 (Source: Ordnance Survey 6-inch map)



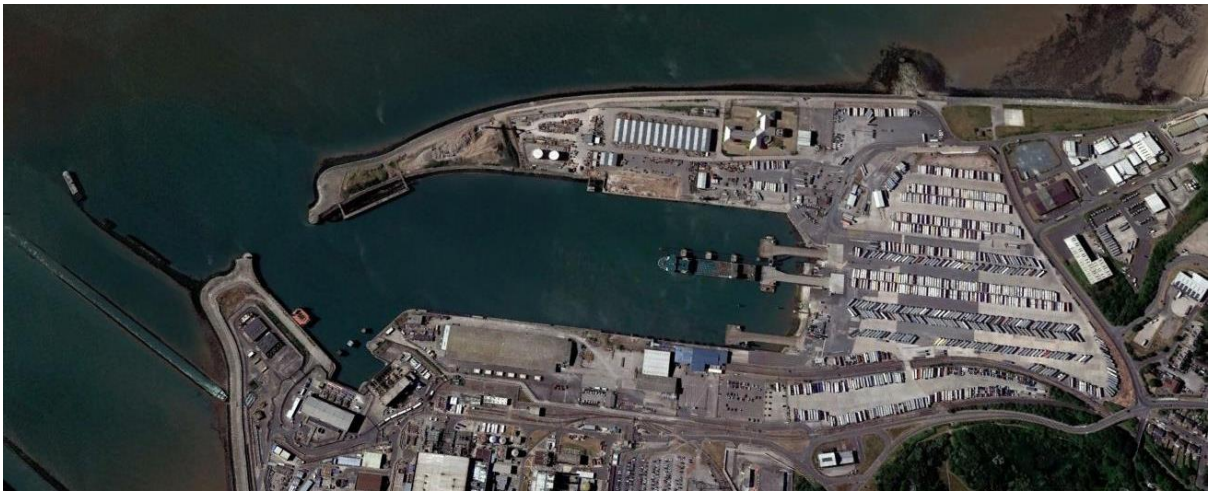
The South Quay in the 1920s
(Source: Lancashire County Council, Red Rose Collection, gratefully acknowledged)

In 1941 the Ocean Oil jetty was built just north of the Harbour to unload tankers carrying oil from Trinidad and the United States to the wartime Trimpell refinery set up at nearby Middleton to produce aviation fuel. After the war the site switched to producing fertilisers and nitric acid. Shell closed the refinery in 1977 and the jetty was demolished.

The Irish ferry traffic was buoyant in the 1950s and 1960s, new ships having been introduced in 1956: but this service closed in 1975. This was a difficult time for the port.

However, new services have developed. It became the service base for the Morecambe Bay gas-field and later for servicing the wind-turbine fields in the Bay. The Isle of Man Steam Packet Company runs a roll-on, roll-off service between Heysham and Douglas. Stena Line sails to Belfast. Seatruck operates services to Dublin and Warrenpoint in Northern Ireland.

The port, now owned by Peel Holdings, specialises in roll-on, roll-off traffic. At Heysham the harbour trades have always grown and shrunk and will doubtless continue to do so.



Heysham Harbour in 2018 (Source: Google Earth, gratefully acknowledged)

Reading

Binns D 1995 *Midland Lines around Morecambe, Heysham and Lancaster.* Skipton: Trackside Publications

Early photographs of Heysham Harbour

Ashworth S and Dalziel N 1993 *Lancaster and District in Old Photographs.* Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing

Alston R 1995 *Morecambe Bay.* Stroud: Chalford Publishing

Other guides of interest in this series include:

8 Glasson

13 Morecambe – the Station to the Sea

59 St George's Quay, Lancaster

Text – Gordon Clark

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