

"Not More Ports, But Better Ports:" The Development of British Ports since 1945

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In July 1962 the British Cabinet received a report from the Minister of Transport about the problems of the British shipping industry. One difficulty was that "British shipping has the disadvantage of being the largest user of British ports." This condemnation of the condition of British ports was not new; indeed, in December 1960 the Minister of Transport had told Cabinet's Economic Policy Committee that domestic ports "are neither adequate nor efficient" and that "both management and equipment of United Kingdom ports is old-fashioned and labour relations bad."² This gloomy picture had led Cabinet in 1961 to establish a committee under Lord Rochdale to examine the major ports and to suggest ways in which they might become more efficient. The Rochdale Report was published in September 1962 and many of its recommendations were implemented by the Harbours Act of 1964.³ The inquiry marked an important transition in the postwar development of British ports and ushered in a seventeen-year period when, for the first time, British port development was directly influenced by a central supervisory body, the National Ports Council (NPC).

British port development since the Second World War may be roughly divided into three parts. Despite some important changes, such as the nationalisation of some ports and the establishment of the Dock Workers Employment Scheme, the 1945-1964 period was characterised by a continuance of the old system rooted in the nineteenth century. The second period spanned the years from the Harbours Act until 1981, and was marked principally by the control over port development exercised by the National Ports Council (NPC). The final era, from the abolition of the NPC in 1981 to the present, was one in which government de-regulated British ports and energetically pursued the objective of privatisation.

This essay gives a general overview of the post-1945 era, concentrating particularly on the NPC period, a time of massive change in British ports caused by four main factors: increasing ship size; (containerisation and the revolution in cargo handling brought about by) roll on/roll off (ro-ro) traffic; changing trade patterns caused by Britain's entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973; and the need for port facilities to support the offshore oil and gas industry in the North Sea.

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To understand these changes, we must return to the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. British ports had been directly controlled by government during the war, but the Ministry of Transport withdrew after 1945 and direct control over Britain's 300 ports, of which 100 were significant commercial undertakings, reverted to individual port authorities.⁴ Some, such as London, were run by public trusts; others, like Bristol, were operated by local municipal bodies; while yet others, such as Manchester, were administered by private companies. The major postwar change in port administration was that under the Transport Act of 1947, ports owned by railway and canal companies came under the public stewardship of the Docks Division of the British Transport Commission (BTC). These nationalised ports comprised thirty percent of Britain's port capacity, and the BTC was given the power to draw up a national plan for their development, a programme that might be extended to non-nationalised ports. In the end, no such design was ever prepared and the powers to do so were removed by the Transport Act of 1953.⁵ The BTC ports continued to function as individual entities, and their diversity was further increased when in 1962 control passed to three new bodies: the British Transport Docks Board (BTDB), controlling ports on Humberside, South Wales, and at Southampton; the British Railways Board, which ran ferry ports such as Holyhead, Folkestone, and Parkestone Quay at Harwich; and the British Waterways Board, with small ports such as Sharpness and Gloucester. By the early 1960s, although nearly one-third of port capacity was publicly owned, its management and development were as diverse and uncoordinated as among the non-nationalised port authorities.

An important change during the Second World War had been that British dock labour, previously hired on a casual basis, was given some security of employment. A register was prepared and only those listed in it could engage in dock work. When not employed, "registered dock workers" were paid a small retainer, a system replaced in 1947 by the similar Dock Workers Employment Scheme, administered by the National Dock Labour Board.⁶ By 1961 about 70,000 of the 150,000 people employed in the ports industry were classified as "registered dock workers." The long-term aim was that casual employment should be ended and every docker should be given a permanent job. The dock labour scheme applied to most ports, but a few, such as Dover and Felixstowe, remained outside, a fact of considerable importance in later years.

Sadly, decasualisation proceeded only slowly. In 1961 only 16,500 of the 70,000 registered dockers were employed as weekly workers, only a small increase from the figure of 13,500 in 1951. This was one of the causes of industrial unrest in docks during the 1950s. Such labour unrest, together with comparatively limited capital investment by port authorities, led to the perception that British ports were inefficient and expensive, often with turnaround times longer than before 1939.⁷

These problems were further aggravated by increasing ship size, particularly of oil tankers and dry-bulk carriers. While deep-water berths were needed for such vessels, British ports had very few. The development after 1958 of a completely new port — the oil terminal at Milford Haven in southwest Wales — was one response, but if older ports were to survive it was clear that they had to invest in new deep-water berths or risk losing

traffic to continental ports, especially Rotterdam. If bulk cargo shipments were lost to foreign ports, general cargo might well follow, with serious implications for ports such as London. These fears seem to have been factors that stimulated Cabinet to establish the Rochdale Inquiry.⁸ Indeed the Rochdale Committee became obsessed with the question of deep-water berths.⁹ It noted that, apart from those nearing completion at Teesport, not a single general-cargo berth had been constructed at a British port since the 1930s. Antwerp alone had more than twice as many berths with depths of over thirty-five feet than all the top fifteen British ports combined. In fact, only five British ports had any berths of this depth at all. Moreover, the committee was aware of the growing challenge of containerisation and ro-ro traffic. If these new cargo-handling methods spread, as seemed likely, even more expensive capital investments would be required.

The Rochdale Committee wanted these new facilities to be built within existing ports. With the exception of oil terminals, Rochdale was generally opposed to creating new ports. The committee agreed with the Cooper Inquiry into Clyde ports in 1945 in recommending "not more ports, but better ports." Rochdale wanted future development concentrated at selected existing ports on the main estuaries, proposing Tilbury, Southampton, Teesport and Leith for major port development, while opposing new projects at Liverpool and Bristol. The committee recognised the potential of the ports on the Stour and Orwell estuaries — Ipswich, Harwich and Felixstowe — but preferred to see new developments within the port of London.

But how was such a national development plan to be carried out when there were so many ports, each run by an authority which could not be expected to think in anything but local terms? Rochdale's suggestion was to establish a non-operational national ports authority to plan and co-ordinate development around the country, as well as to advise the Ministry of Transport. In particular the national ports authority should encourage the amalgamation of the various authorities into Estuarial groups to allow rationalisation.

The Rochdale recommendations were largely implemented by the Harbours Act of 1964, which set up the NPC to supervise port development. Section 9 of the Act stipulated that all proposed harbour developments costing more than £500,000 (£1 million from 1971) were to be submitted to the Minister of Transport, who would take advice from the NPC. While section 11 permitted government to make loans for such projects, the advice of the NPC was to be obtained before approval was given. During the first decade of its existence 170 port development schemes, with a total estimated cost of £125 million, were referred to the NPC for consideration. Most were eventually approved, and by 1974 there were twenty-two deep-sea and fifty short-sea container berths, as well as seventy-six ro-ro berths, with a total throughput exceeding twenty-eight million tonnes per year and a theoretical maximum that was much higher.¹⁰

One of the first tasks faced by the NPC was to reorganize British port authorities into Estuarial groups. Council intended that such amalgamations should include, where appropriate, the nationalized BTDB ports, such as Southampton and on Humberside. Between 1964 and 1970 amalgamations were achieved on the Clyde, Tees, Forth, Humber, Medway and Tyne estuaries and at Southampton. Less success was achieved on

the Thames, Severn, Mersey, and Stour/Orwell estuaries, where various port authorities fought for their autonomy, although both the Thames and Mersey had one authority that was clearly dominant.¹¹

Once the number of port authorities had been reduced, the NPC then turned to the overhauling of their management structures. Principal targets were the trust ports, many with constitutions from the nineteenth century. The NPC proposed to reduce management boards to eight to ten members; to include a substantial minority of full-time executive officers; and to ensure that non-executive board members were appointed for their knowledge and experience rather than because they were from a particular interest group. Between 1970 and 1978 the boards for the Forth, Clyde, Tyne, Medway, Tees, Ipswich and Dover port authorities were all reconstituted along these lines. The Port of London Authority (PLA) was also reordered early in 1976, although with more members than the NPC recommended. The Milford Haven board was altered largely as the NPC proposed, though it retained a measure of representation for certain interest groups.

Britain's entry in 1973 into the EEC accelerated trade patterns that were apparent from the early 1960s. In 1961 almost one-third of British trade was with Western Europe, but by the mid-1970s the proportion had risen to almost one-half and was still growing. Britain's deep-sea trade only increased by six percent between 1966 and 1977, while total British seaborne trade grew by twenty-five percent in the same period, with most of the increase on short-sea routes.¹² These shifting trade patterns boosted the importance of ports on the south and east coasts. One of the principal growth regions was the Stour/Orwell estuaries. Even by 1975 the ports of the area together ranked second only to London in value and tonnage of non-fuel exports.¹³ While Felixstowe's early success was built on ro-ro and container traffic to the continent, it soon rivalled Tilbury and Southampton in deep-sea containers.

One of Felixstowe's advantages was that it was outside the national dock labour scheme and so comparatively free of labour problems. The other principal non-scheme ports were Dover, Portsmouth, Shoreham, and the harbours controlled by the British Railways Board. By 1973 non-scheme ports accounted for twenty percent of Britain's traffic, and from 1965 to 1970 their dry-cargo tonnage rose by 11.5% per year, compared to an annual increase of only 0.5% at the scheme ports.¹⁴

Industrial unrest in the latter ports led in 1965 to the Devlin Report, which recommended the immediate decasualisation of dock labour. All registered dockers were to be employed on a permanent basis. In 1967 a revised Dock Workers Employment Scheme implemented these recommendations. Yet dock workers were being promised permanent jobs at a time when containerisation and ro-ro traffic were drastically reducing labour requirements. The 1970s were marked by further labour unrest as efforts were made to find work for dockers. Ports such as London and Liverpool were compelled to employ many registered dock workers even though there was no work, thus assuming ever-increasing financial burdens.¹⁵

While the NPC was largely an observer of these deep-seated labour problems, it was more directly involved in the provision of port facilities for Britain's North Sea oil

and gas industry, which was of the greatest importance to the nation's future. At the start of the 1970s the NPC surveyed the likely requirements of the offshore industry, concluding there was already sufficient capacity for large numbers of support vessels and similar craft. The only new ports needed were oil terminals, and the NPC was closely involved in three: Cromarty (Nigg Bay); Flotta at Scapa Flow in the Orkneys; and Sullom Voe in the Shetlands. The first North Sea oil was landed in 1975; the Flotta terminal came on stream in 1976; and Sullom Voe shipped its first oil in 1978, soon becoming one of Britain's chief ports, handling fifty million tons of oil per year by 1988.¹⁶

Margaret Thatcher's rise to power in 1979 brought commitments to port de-regulation. In December it was announced that the NPC was to be phased out, a policy finalised by the Transport Act of 1981. In 1982 ownership of the nationalised ports passed to Associated British Ports (ABP) with the intention, since achieved, that ABP should become a private company. In 1993 the twenty-two ports owned by ABP handled 106 million tonnes of cargo, one-fifth of Britain's total traffic. At the same time, government provided financial support to various ports to dispense with redundant dockers, and in 1989 the old dock labour scheme was ended. The Ports Act of 1991 permitted the PLA to create a private company to operate Tilbury and encouraged the remaining trust ports to do likewise. The Clyde, Forth, Tees, and Medway port authorities soon followed Tilbury into the private sector. Some municipal ports also copied the trend, with Bristol, for example, passing to a private company on a 150-year lease in 1991. By 1993 nine of the top ten British ports were wholly or largely controlled by private interests. The single exception was Sullom Voe, a municipal port owned by the Shetland Islands Council. In 1994 it was announced that Felixstowe, the flagship of the privately-owned ports, had become the leading container port in the UK, the fourth in Europe, and the fifteenth in the world, handling almost half Britain's deep-sea container traffic. It was also, after Dover, the second largest ro-ro port in the UK.¹⁷

If Britain's major ports are now largely run by private companies, this should not detract from the achievements of the NPC, which helped to direct British port development "through a particularly significant period when the ports had to adjust to new cargo handling systems and new cargo directions and in general cope with changes on a scale unequalled since the sailing ship was replaced by steam ship."¹⁸ The NPC played its part in ensuring that while Britain might have fewer ports, they would be better ports.

NOTES

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1. Great Britain, Public Record Office (PRO), Cabinet Papers (CAB) 129/110, "Report on the British Shipping Industry," 20 July 1962.

2. PRO, CAB 134/1688, "Report on Efficiency of British Ports," 15 December 1960.

3. Great Britain, House of Commons, Parliamentary Papers, "Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Major Ports of Great Britain" (1961-1962), XX ("Rochdale Report"). See also James Bird, *Major Seaports of the United Kingdom* (London, 1963) and Viscount Rochdale, "The Reorganisation of British Ports," *Journal of The Royal Society of Arts*, November 1964, 901-915. For details of port-related legislation, see the relevant volumes of *Halsbury's Statutes*.
4. Gilmour Jenkins, *The Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation* (London, 1959), 86-91 and 94-95. See also Docks & Harbour Authorities Association, "Port-War Organisation of Docks and Harbours" (Report adopted by the Association, 14 February 1945).
5. For an overview of the main British ports around 1950 see British Transport Commission, *Reports by the Docks and Inland Waterways Executive on the Review of Trade Harbours* (London, 1951).
6. For British dock labour since 1945 see D.F. Wilson, *Dockers: The Impact of Industrial Change* (London, 1972) and P. Turnbull, *et al*, *Dock Strike: Conflict and Restructuring in Britain's Ports* (Aldershot, 1992). See also National Dock Labour Board, *An Introduction to Port Working* (London, 1955).
7. See *Report of the Ministry of Transport Working Party on the Turn Round of Shipping in UK Ports* (HMSO, 1948); *Report of the Ministry of Transport Working Party on Increased Mechanisation in U.K. Ports* (London, 1950); and *Report to the Secretary of State of the Ports Efficiency Committee* (London, 1952).
8. PRO, CAB 134/1685, Minutes of Meeting of the Economic Policy Committee of Cabinet, 19 December 1960.
9. "Rochdale Report," 22-23 and 27-28.
10. National Ports Council (NPC), *Annual Report*, 1974. The NPC *Annual Reports* (and other NPC publications) are important sources for the history of British port development, 1964-1981. The 1979 *Annual Report* gives a particularly valuable overview of the NPC's work during the previous fifteen years and includes as an appendix the report of October 1979 to the Minister of Transport arguing for the retention of a central port authority.
11. For details of British ports around 1970 see G. Adams, *The Organisation of the British Port Transport Industry* (London, 1973). See also *Report to Parliament by the Minister of Transport on the Reorganisation of the Ports* (HMSO, 1969).
12. Central Office of Information (COI), *British Industry Today: Ports* (London, 1974), 1 and 6; NPC, *Annual Report*, 1979. For a comparison of British ports with those in other EEC countries in the mid-1970s, see Commission of European Communities, *Report of an Enquiry into the Current Situation in the Major Community Sea-Ports Drawn up by the Port Working Group* (Brussels, 1977).
13. NPC, *Annual Report*, 1976.
14. COI, *Ports*, 13.
15. For postwar developments in London and Liverpool, see R. Douglas Brown, *The Port of London* (London, 1978), 110-190; and F.E. Hyde, *Liverpool and the Mersey: The Development of a Port, 1700-1970* (Newton Abbot, 1971), 178-214. See also G. Jackson, *The History and Archaeology of Ports* (Tadworth, 1983), 140-166, and J. Hovey, *A Tale of Two Ports: London and Southampton* (London, 1990).
16. Port developments relating to North Sea oil and gas can be followed in NPC *Annual Reports* during the 1970s. See also C. Harvie, *Fool's Gold: The Story of North Sea Oil* (London, 1994).
17. COI, *Britain 1995: An Official Handbook* (London, 1995); *Halsbury's Laws of England*, ports section, 1995 supplement; information provided by the Felixstowe Dock and Railway Company and Bristol Port Company.
18. NPC, *Annual Report*, 1979.