

THE MAN AND THE TOWN.

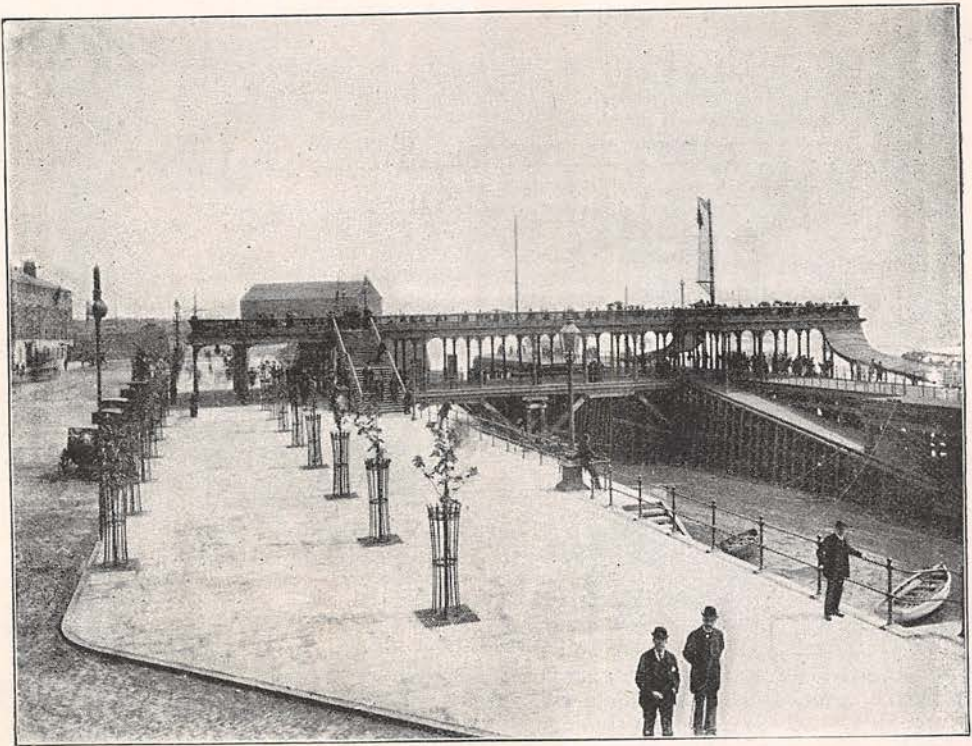
MR. C. H. WILSON, M.P., AND HULL.

IN walking about the docks of Hull—to which, it may be said, one is at once led by any of the main roads in the town—the observant stranger cannot but notice the large number of fine steamships with red funnels and green hulls. “They’re Wilson’s parrots,” a bystander will probably reply, if inquiry is made of him, in tones indicating great surprise that anyone should need to be informed of so obvious a fact. For “Wilson’s parrots” are the most important things from the bread-and-butter point of view in this great town, to which their steam voices tell a story of an increasing amount of work and wages. Mr. C. H. Wilson may have always been associated in your mind with the town, which used to be on the river Hull, and is now mostly on the Humber; but until you see the flags of the firm flying from innumerable masts-heads you do not realise the true significance of their association. You then learn without astonishment that in one week every third ship due at the port has belonged to Messrs. Thomas Wilson and Sons, that at times 5000 men are employed in loading and unloading their vessels, and that in their offices close to the docks about 500 clerks are employed. And you are no longer surprised that Mr. C. H. Wilson, M.P., as head of this firm, should have obtained a position of personal supremacy even in a community of over 200,000 people.

There have been many famous ship-owners in the long history of Hull. But to find a parallel to the position of the Wilsons in the nineteenth century we have to go back to the fourteenth century, when the family of the De la Poles were laying the foundations of their greatness by the ships which they sailed from Hull. The parallel is, indeed, rather a remarkable one. William de la Pole, like Thomas Wilson, started with one small ship, and both died, fairly wealthy for their time, leaving three sons, who were destined to become the largest private ship-owners of their generation. Richard, William, and John de la Pole

converted the wealth of their father into affluence beyond the dreams of his avarice by the success with which, in their well-built and heavily armed vessels, they defied the privateers that were at that time the terror of English trade. David, Charles, and Arthur Wilson extended the power of their firm beyond the greatest ambition of its founder by the energy and skill with which they superseded the old sailing-vessels by the new steam-ships. John de la Pole retired from the business at a comparatively early period, leaving his two brothers to reap the full reward of their enterprise. David Wilson gave up his partnership in 1867, leaving Charles and Arthur to reap the ever-increasing prosperity of the firm. Finally, one of the two brothers De la Pole found favour at the Court, and in his own splendid mansion entertained royalty. Truly must the Wilsons appear to the people of Hull as the De la Poles of the nineteenth century!

Opinion in Hull is by no means unanimous on the subject of the rise of the Wilsons. By some it is attributed to pluck, energy, shrewdness—to an exceptional combination, in fact, of the best business qualities; by others it is explained simply by sheer luck, the stars in their courses fighting for the ships which bore the Wilson colours. Truly destiny seems to have marked out the family as the De la Poles of the Hull of our own day. To begin with, the late Thomas Wilson was able quite early in his career to amalgamate his business interests with what were sixty years ago two of the most influential ship-owners of the port. About forty years ago, when the Wilsons had just discovered for themselves the great possibilities of steam, they were threatened with the competition of the North of Europe Steam Navigation Company; but in some inscrutable way they were able to persuade the directors to hand over the working of the company’s ships to their firm. In three years the company went into liquidation, owing to losses at other ports, and the Wilsons gained its Hull trade. Another



CORPORATION PIER, HULL.



WILBERFORCE MONUMENT AND DOCK OFFICES, HULL.

dangerous rival, Mr. Zachary Pearson, came to grief in consequence of the downfall of Messrs. Overend and Gurney. A few years ago Messrs. Wilson, Sons, and Co. were able to buy up the fleet and the trade of another old firm in Hull, and were thus left in undisputed leadership of the commerce of the port.

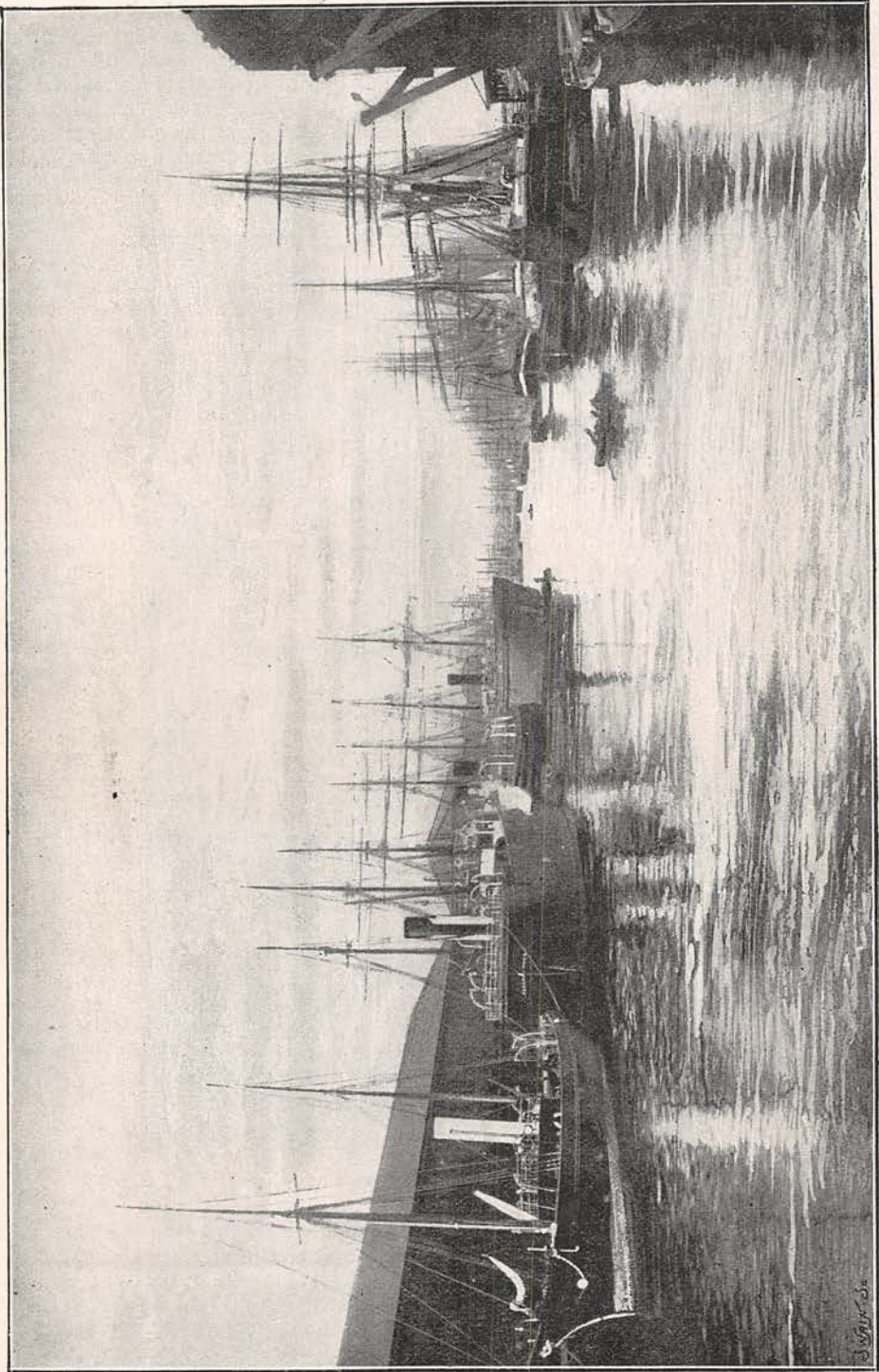
been established five years before. The Humber Dock was finished in 1809, and twenty years later the Junction Dock, which, as another result of a royal visit, was subsequently rechristened the "Prince's." These three docks, with their several basins, cause the oldest part of the town to be surrounded by water, and in



TOWN HALL, HULL.

When Mr. C. H. Wilson entered his father's business Hull had five docks with a space of about fifty acres; it now has ten, with an area of nearly one hundred and fifty acres. These figures may be said to measure the commercial development of the town in which Mr. Wilson has taken so large a share. The oldest dock, which is now called the "Queen's," was opened in 1778, the Hull Dock Company having

referring to this part you will often hear people speak of it as "in the docks." On this island are Whitefriargate, still the principal street of Hull, and High Street, now given over entirely to trade, but at one time the abode of the wealthiest people of the town. Among the mansions still standing in this long narrow street by the waterside is that in which Wilberforce, the emancipator, was born. It is built in an

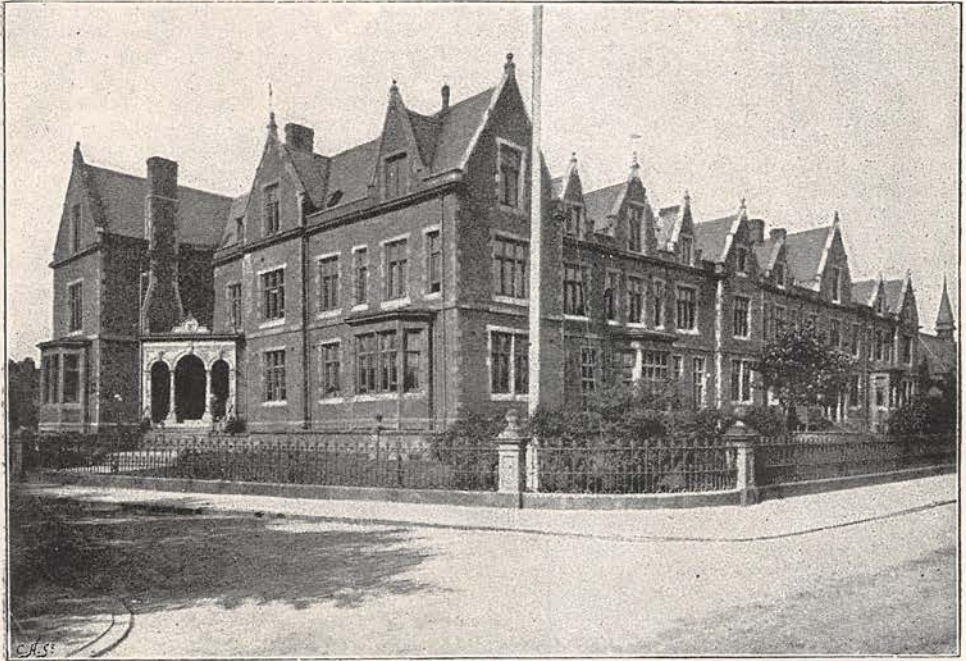


ALBERT DOCKS, HULL.

J. W. M. S.

old Dutch style, with a tower in the centre, and has a fine pillared entrance-gate, now decorated, unhappily, with the names of the firms having offices within. Wilberforce House was originally the residence of Sir John Lister, a merchant prince of Hull in the time of Charles I., whom he entertained within its walls. It is rather a matter of reproach to Hull, I think, that such a fine old historic residence should be let out as offices, and, consequently, not to be seen by the public; yet the fine stone column close to Whitefriagate Bridge

still existing, apparently of the same period: one of them, having the sign of "The King's Head," was once the leading inn in the town. It is worth while struggling along the narrow street, through which heavy wagons and drays are constantly passing, to see these old dwellings, whose quaintness is greatly emphasised by the grain-elevators and other tall buildings which they now have for neighbours. The antiquarian could, in fact, spend many pleasant hours "within the Docks." Holy Trinity, now the cathedral church of Hull,



SEAMEN'S ORPHANS' HOME, SPRINGBANK, HULL.

would suggest that the people of Hull are not indifferent to the memory of the statesman who represented them in Parliament for so many years. That was erected a good many years ago, however. It would be a fitting thing for the present generation of townsmen to place fresh flowers on Wilberforce's grave, so to speak, by putting his house in the trust and under the protection of the town.

Another old house in High Street is traditionally believed to have been the residence of some members of the De la Pole family — a long building, with overhanging storeys and curious wood-carvings. There are several other structures

and St. Mary's, the Trinity House, a number of hospitals or almshouses, and several other survivals of old Hull would be full of interest to him. One of these old streets, by-the-way, is called "The Land of Green Ginger," and the origin of this name is a standing puzzle to local students of ancient lore. According to one version, a German landgrave resided in a mansion at the end of this street, which at that time was a rustic lane. "Landgrave Ganger" came into use as a description of the walk to this dignitary's house, and in course of time it became "Land of Green Ginger"! Up to the present, Hull has had to content itself with this explanation.

One needs to make the acquaintance of the old town in order to fully realise the growth of Hull in the era of the Wilson line. This era might be said to begin with the opening of the Railway Dock in 1846, and the Victoria Dock four years later. The Railway Dock is almost entirely monopolised by vessels of the Wilson line. Messrs. Wilson's offices—a fine building of two storeys—are close to this dock, and a walk through them is suggestive both of the extensive business of the firm and of

stewards calling for instructions, Customs' House emissaries obtaining official information, etc.

The Wilson fleet now numbers eighty-five vessels, varying in tonnage from 4604 to 487. About thirty have a tonnage of over 2000 apiece. The largest and newest vessels are employed in the rapidly developing trade with the United States, such as the *Francisco* (4604), the *Buffalo* (4431), and the *Ohio* (4100). These vessels are berthed in Hull's newest dock—the

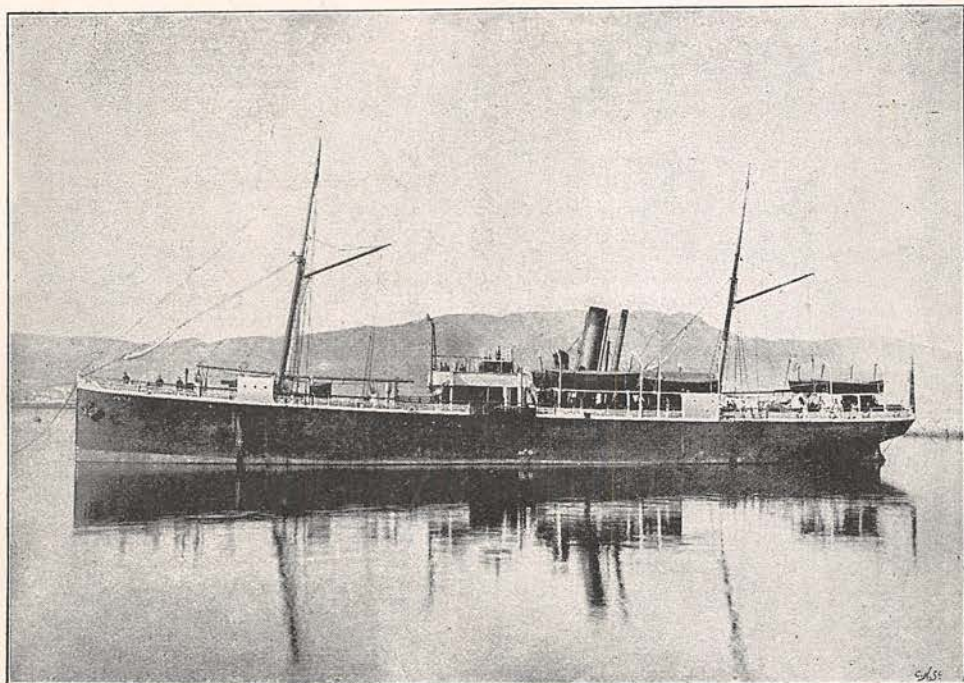


Photo by E. Oisen.

THE WILSON LINER "JUNO."

its admirable management. The two floors are divided into a number of compartments, each with its quota of busy clerks bearing the names of the numerous ports to which Messrs. Wilson's ships are sent. Hamburg, Gothenburg, Christiania, Copenhagen, and the Baltic ports are, of course, the most important centres of their trade. But the screech of "Wilson's parrots" are now heard more or less frequently in harbours as far from each other as New York and Melbourne, Odessa and Bombay, Venice and Buenos Ayres. Through these spacious rooms there is a constant stream of people—inquirers as to routes, fares, etc., passengers about to embark, captains and

Alexandra—at the extreme east of the town. Walking from the Old Harbour you pass on the way the Victoria Docks, and the timbers and ponds of Earle's Shipbuilding Yards, where most of the Wilson vessels have been built. The width of the roadway, the space on which great industries are carried on, are in striking contrast with the crowding of buildings on the narrow area of the Old Town.

On the western side of the Old Town is the Albert Dock, which contains over twenty-four acres and cost a million sterling. It was opened by the Prince of Wales in 1869, after eight years had been spent in its construction. In so large a dock craft of various sizes and kinds are

always to be found, and the merchandise loaded and unloaded here comprises coal, grain, and fish. One corner of the dock is reserved for fishing-boats, which are thus brought close to the large wholesale fish-market and the ice-houses. Hull's fishing industry developed as the whaling trade declined. Of the perilous expeditions to the northern seas which were a source of so much wealth in the early part of the century a few old seamen in Hull can still tell strange yarns, and a number of gateways in the old parts of the town made of whales' jawbones help to give veracity to their narratives.

Mr. C. H. Wilson, as one of the directors of the Hull Dock Company, has always taken the keenest interest in the improvement of the port, and it is largely owing to his great energy and powerful influence, I was told, that in the last quarter of a century so much has been accomplished. The offices of the company, in their fine site and splendid architecture, symbolise the part which it has played in the progress of the town. Erected twenty-five years on a triangular site close to Whitefriargate Bridge and in full view of the Queen's and Prince's Docks and of several important thoroughfares, the building is still the finest of modern date in Hull.

If you leave the docks and the neighbourhood of the docks, making your way through the town to one of the three principal highways—which bear the names of Beverley, Holderness, and Anlaby Roads, and lead to its villadom and then to the country—there is little to remind you of Mr. C. H. Wilson's personality. He has not given Hull a park like Mr. Zachary Pearson nor a free library like Sir James Reckitt. His benevolence has been content to express itself in giving aid to existing institutions

rather than in devising and carrying out new projects for the welfare of some particular class or for the community as a whole. Thus, in conjunction with his brother Arthur, Mr. Wilson undertook the cost of a new wing of the Seamen's and General Orphan Asylum at Spring Bank. To Holy Trinity he gave a mission-hall in Posterngate for the special use of seamen, and towards the cost of new churches and chapels generally he has made large contributions. But it is evident that the personal popularity which, in spite of the recent dock strike, renders his position as member of Parliament for West Hull absolutely unassailable, proceeds rather from appreciation of the vigour and power of his character and their value to the commercial interests of the town than from the extent or variety of his eleemosynary works.

The merchants of Hull no longer live in the town from which they derive their riches, and it is to be feared that, in this respect, the Wilsons—from the town's point of view—have set them a bad example. For many years Mr. C. H. Wilson resided in a modest house at Cottingham, the first station on the line from Hull to Scarborough. But in 1875, by which time the two brothers had in one year divided profits amounting to several hundred thousand pounds—Mr. Wilson purchased the historic Warter Priory estate, near Pocklington, from Lord Muncaster. As its name indicates, this old mansion was originally a monastery, and with its park of 300 acres it was long regarded as one of the finest ancestral residences in the East Riding. Mr. Wilson never wearies of coming to Hull in response to the calls of business, but to Warter Priory he always returns in search of pleasure and repose.

FREDERICK DOLMAN.



Photo by Turner and Drinkwater, Hull.

MR. C. H. WILSON, M.P.