

Moments in Time # 5

Idwal Williams' Graig Shipping Company

By Geoff Walker



CRAIG



Cardiff, in Wales has long been associated with ship owning for more than a century and is broadly considered to be one of the founding ports in the United Kingdom where the age of the “Tramp Steamer” evolved, it was once the largest coal exporting port in Europe



One of the last renowned survivors of the Cardiff shipping companies, was **Idwal Williams' Craig Shipping Company**. Established at Cardiff in October 1919, by Mr. Idwal Williams, along with several other local businessmen. Sporting a distinctly green, white, and red house flag and funnel logo, representing his Welsh heritage, Idwal Williams' Craig Shipping Company became a true Welsh symbol.

Left, an interesting image of Cardiff Coaling Port taken during 1920s.

Idwal Williams had acquired his shipping knowledge in the offices of the Bristol Steam Navigation Company and Furness Withy lines.

The company's first ship was an ex - First World War tramp steamer. The new owner was very shrewd and realizing that the buoyant shipping market that prevailed at the time was not likely to last, he adopted a conservative management style and fixed the ship on two-year time charter carrying coal from Durban, South Africa, to Kenya. Shipping rates did decline as Williams had predicted but his time charter, which he had secured earlier on good terms, stood the fledgling company in good stead. The venture was very profitable and more than recovered the capital cost of the vessel, when it was finally sold at the end of the charter, in 1922. It was the well thought through management style at Craig Shipping that enabled the company to outlast the great depression, where many competitors and other tramp ship owners, failed miserably.



Left, **SS Graig** was a cargo vessel of 3,683 tons built in 1924 by Robert Duncan & Co, Port Glasgow, for the Graig Shipping Company, Cardiff. On the 4th May 1940 she ran aground off Egg Island, Nova Scotia. She was declared a Constructive Total Loss and subsequently she broke in two. Both sections were later salvaged and scrapped at Halifax.

(Image Courtesy of the National Museum of Wales)

During the 1920s and 1930s, Graig's business activity continued in the ownership and management of steamships engaged in various worldwide tramp trades, usually following the "Coal Out-Grain Home" philosophy, which kept his vessels gainfully employed.

When World War 2 broke out, Graig Shipping had a fleet of two ships, with another one on order. Both existing ships were lost in 1940 while a replacement purchased in 1941 was also lost leaving the company with just the "Graiglas", delivered in 1940. along with 4 steamships managed on behalf of the UK's Ministry of War Transport. At the conclusion of hostilities, anticipating a worldwide upturn trading conditions post-war, Graig purchased 3 war-time built ships from the Government, and chartered a 4th whilst retaining 2 others under their management. In keeping with the new world order and Welsh traditions Craig Shipping, decided to paint the hull of their ships green, at the same time over painting their all black funnel with the green and white Welsh flag, with a Large Red "G" which replaced the red dragon

An office was also established in London, in order that the company may maintain a closer working presence at the Baltic Exchange. In line with the company strategy of expansion, in 1952 it acquired the

London based “**Basra Shipping Company**”, restyling it “**Glynafon Shipping Co.**”, which in turn became a subsidiary of the **Graig Shipping Company**.

The acquisition of Basra Shipping had brought with it the virtually brand new “**Sherbourne**” which became Graig’s first Motor ship with accommodation aft. She was a geared bulk carrier and upon joining their fleet, it was renamed “**Graigwerdd**”.

With the introduction of the Government’s credit scheme for shipbuilding, the company took advantage of this facility and built 3 ships during the 1960s. With the passing of the company founder Mr. Idwal Williams, in 1971, his son Mr. Desmond Williams who had been with the company since 1945, assumed the role of company chairman. This change in the philosophy of senior management signaled the end of their conventional fleet of ships, with only Bulk Carriers being built and operated by the company thereafter.

Under the leadership of Desmond Williams, the company embarked upon a policy of diversifying its business interests, and over ensuing years became involved in a wide scope of new ventures, most allied to the shipping business. However, shipping remained its focal area of activity and the company was re-branded as **Graig Shipping PLC**. which remains the sole survivor of the numerous tramp ship companies once based in Cardiff.



The classic British tramp ship “**Graigwen**” captured on film after the corporate decision to restyle their ships with a green hull and green, white, and red emblmed funnel markings.

Built by Wm Gray, West Hartlepool in 1948, the handsome looking “**Graigfelen.**” She possessed a very stately profile, which was typical of British Tramp Ships of the era.



Hugh Williams, grandson of Idwal, assumed the role of company chairman in 1993, whereupon non-marine interests were disposed of and **“Graig Shipmanagement”** was established. Commercial partnerships followed, resulting in new company taking on the management of a number, of newly constructed multi-purpose ships built in China. Flexibility of management to adjust to changing times and market requirements had been the key factor behind the company’s success.

Graig had always maintained a strong connection in the Far East, having operated in China for more than 25 years and through its office in China, **Graig Shipping Plc**, operating as a subsidiary of Idwal Williams & Company, today offers a wide range of technical and commercial services to the international shipping sector, including amongst other things, construction supervision, financing and ship management. This has formed one of the foundations on which Craig has supervised the build of over 150 vessels in China and Asia since 1997.

During 2012, the Graig Group took delivery of the 35,000 dwt, handy size bulk carrier **“Graig Cardiff”** (see below image) the first of two vessels built for Graig and partners, at Jiangdong Shipyard, Wu Hu, China.



The **Graig Cardiff** is one of the **Lauritzen Bulker Pool** ships and successfully undertook her maiden voyage from Shanghai to Argentina. Her sister vessel, the **Graig Rotterdam**, was also delivered later the same year.

Both vessels were constructed under the supervision of **Graig China Limited** and are managed by **Graig's ship management divisions** in Cardiff.

In 2017 **“Graig Shipmanagement”** was taken over by **Vships**, another large, leading London based, management conglomerate. This was part of the modern trend of building partnerships and alliances, streamlining business models and creating new opportunities whether they be financial or otherwise, to meet the modern-day requirements of a highly competitive and regulated industry. Obviously, the expertise Graig had built over the years, made it an attractive and practical proposition for the Vships Group to acquire.

All this was probably never imagined by Idwal Williams in 1919, when he incorporated this renowned shipping icon of a bygone era, more than 100 years ago, and still going strong.

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