

THE RIVER

by Frank Byrne

We walked down Maddox Road, my great-uncle and I. He had been born in 1851, the year of the "Great Exhibition" and to me, a child of seven, he seemed very old and knowledgeable. Our favourite seat on Wallasey promenade was unoccupied. The time was August 1939 just before the beginning of the Second World War.

There before us was the estuary of the river Mersey between the port of Liverpool and the shipbuilding town of Birkenhead. On the far shore were the Bootle docks with warehouses and the tall chimneys of the Clarence Dock power station. Further up river on the distant bank could be seen the Princes landing stage where the big Atlantic liners took on and deposited their many passengers and beyond this the smaller floating landing stage used by the Mersey ferry boats which crossed the river frequently, carrying passengers between Liverpool and the Wirral peninsula.

The Mersey, being a tidal river with a deep water channel close to the Liverpool bank, could cope with the big Atlantic liners, the Irish seat ferries to Dublin, Belfast and Douglas on the Isle of Man and freighters bound for the north and south docks with their cargos of sugar, palm fruit and fuel oil.

The river was very busy with any number of different ships passing up and down the estuary; all had their characteristically painted funnels in the colours of the different shipping companies. My great uncle had been a ship's decorator on the Atlantic liners, his trade being that of a "grainer", a long disappeared occupation. He had been used to working on the oak and mahogany woodwork of the cabins and companion ways and he was familiar with the various funnel colours. He delighted in giving me as running commentary on the various shipping lines of the vessels which passed up and down the river.

As well as these colourful ships, there were other boats, dirty with salt-caked funnels and rusty paintwork. These "rust buckets" as my great uncle called them, were the dredgers. These dredgers had an important function to fulfil in keeping the deep water channels free from silt, scooping it up with the mechanical shovels at their bows and depositing it beyond the "bar". I was never quite sure what the "bar" was, but eventually learned that it was a place in Liverpool bay where a large sandbank divided the river from the open sea. It was at the "bar" that the big ships took on board the river pilots who guided them through the sandbanks and brought them up river.

Occasionally sleek grey vessels would enter the river flying the White Ensign at the stern. These were ships of the Royal Navy - sloops, frigates and destroyers heading for a refit or repair at the shipyards of Cammel Lairds on the Birkenhead side of the river.

When the bright red funnel of the Manx ferry came up the river at 4.30 p.m. it was time to go home for tea. The way up Maddox Road was steep and my great uncle would get out of breath so needed to take it very slowly which suited my short legs, but I was able to have a look back from time to time at the river, ever hopeful that a final big boat would glide into view.