

# Britain Steamship Company Limited – Watts, Watts, and Company

By Geoff Walker



Many may think that **Watts, Watts** or the **Britain Steamship Company Ltd (BSSC)** has its origins in London because they have a name convention for naming their ships after London suburbs, however this is incorrect. The Watts family hailed from Northumbria, had an established connection with the collieries, and are believed to have first become shipowners in 1715.

In the mid - 1850s **W. H. Watts** owned several small sailing ships, engaged in carrying coal from Blyth along the UK coast in winter, and as far as Spain and the Baltic in the summer months. Together with two friends he formed **Watts, Milburn & Co** in 1885, initially operating with sailing ships before acquiring the ageing small steamer “**Gosforth**” built in 1856. With the view to expanding their business they opened a London office in 1861 and the steamer “**Surbiton**” was built and joined their emerging fleet. This was the point at which it became the company’s policy of naming its ships after London suburbs and the naming convention came about.

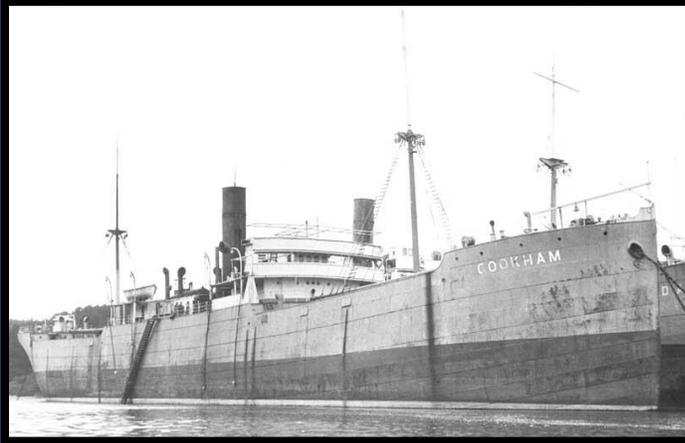
During the fledgling years of development, the company had experienced some difficulties in securing full cargoes of coal from the North Eastern ports due to the number of independent mines involved in the trade. Hence, it is reported that Watts took the remedial action of taking control of some of the North-East collieries to solve the problem, which appears to have been successful. Subsequent to this, in 1872, **Watts, Milburn & Co** was dissolved and replaced by **Watts, Ward & Co**.

Although the company’s steamers still normally operated in the UK coastal and intermediate trades, longer voyages began to be undertaken. By the early 1880s its coastal trade had become controlled from Newcastle and deep-sea trading from London. In 1884 the **Britain S S Co Ltd (BSSC)** was formed to act as the instrument to own most of Watts’ ships, and the name of the management company for his ships was changed to **Watts, Watts & Co** in 1896.

In 1914, at the outbreak of WW1, Watts owned 22 steamers, of which 13 were lost to enemy action, during the course of hostilities, one sank after a collision, two were posted missing and one wrecked. The Government Shipping Controller placed two ships under Watts’ management and three reparations steamers were allocated to the company. Second - hand vessels were bought after the war to replenish and restructure its fleet which he rebuilt to 19 ships, by 1920.

The company thrived, despite the economic turbulence of the 1920s, but it suffered severely during the Great Depression, in early 1930s, which caused Watts to lay-up several vessels on the River Dart, and some were sold. By the outbreak of WW2, the fleet had been reduced to 9 steamers, of which 5 were lost, although the Ministry of War Transport (MOWT) allocated at least 10 ships to Watts’ management.

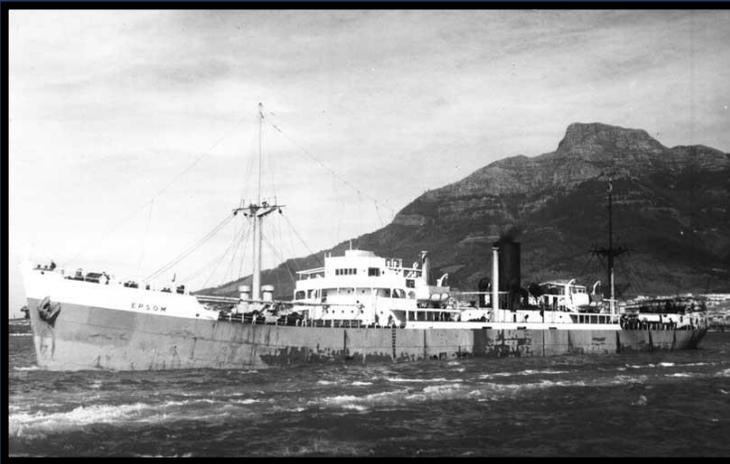
A number of war-standard motor ships were obtained, and the last steamers were sold in 1958. A construction program of high quality motorships of advanced design was undertaken, to operate a service from London to the east coast of Canada and with the aim of obtaining charters from liner companies.



Left, image of the old Watts, Watts Steamship **Cookham**, built 1906. Pictured whilst in Lay-up during the Great Depression years of the early 1930s. Their ships were mostly laid-up in the River Dart.

Cookham had a long and varied career, being built as **Garscube** for T. McCrindell, Glasgow, 1909 sold to D. Russell & Co, Leith renamed **Craigmor**, 1913 sold to C. Walton, Leith renamed **Neilrose**, 1916 sold to Woolston SS Co, Leith, 1918 sold

to Charlton SS Co, Newcastle, renamed - **Heathside**, 1919 sold to Care & Marquand Shipping, Newcastle, 1921 renamed **Arncliffe**, 1925 purchased by BSSC and renamed **Cookham** until 1932 when scrapped.



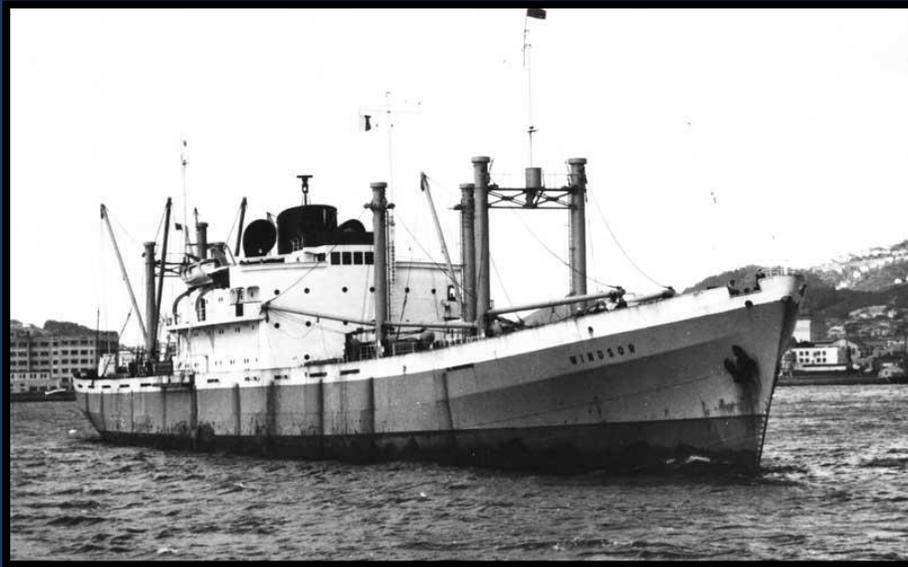
Left, the WW2 built **Epsom** pictured at Capetown. Built by Caledon Shipbuilding & Engineering Co., Dundee in 1945. She had a GRT of 6712 tons. Originally built as **Empire Favour** for MOWT, 1947 purchased by BSSC and renamed **Epsom**, 1950 sold to Court Line - London, renamed **Errington Court**, 1956 sold to M. Embiricos, Liberia - renamed Penelope, 1964 sold to Dalia Cia Nav, Piraeus - renamed Andromachi. 1969 shelled by Israeli artillery at Suez and burned out.



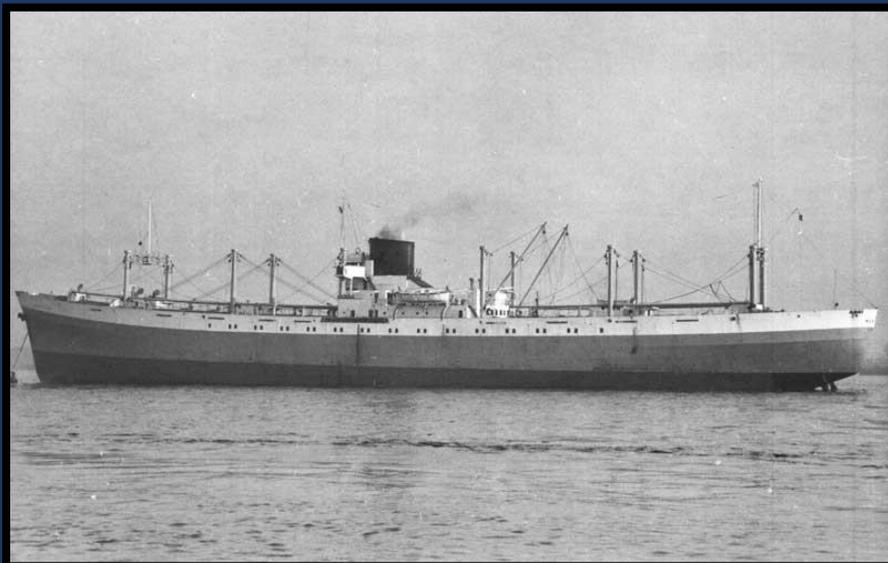
Left, another WW2 built vessel, the 1943 **Greenwich**. Built by Wm. Doxford & Sons Ltd., Sunderland. She had a GRT of 7259 tons.

In 1959 sold to Argus SS Co, Liberia - renamed **Portador**, April 1962 abandoned on fire in position 51.15N 15.34W.

Below, some of the new motorships of innovative design, built by Watts, Watts during the early 1950s.



**MV Windsor.** Grt 7652, built in 1952 by Barclay, Curle & Co. Ltd., Glasgow, for Britain Steamship Company Ltd., under Watts,Watts & Co., management. In 1963 sold Great Eastern Shipping, Bombay - renamed Jag Ketu, 1968 sold to Lion International, London - renamed Eastern Lion, 1972 sold to Yick Fung Shipping, Somalia - 1975 transferred ownership to Chinese Government, 1992 deleted from registers.



**MV Wanstead** built 1949 had an interesting career, she was chartered to Port Line as **Port Wanstead** from 1957 to 1960; to Lamport & Holt as **Raeburn** from 1963 to 1964; to John Swire & Sons as **Wanliu** from 1964 to 1969, when she was sold to Swire's China Navigation Co, together with her two sisters. In 1975 the **Wanstead** was sold to Maldives Shipping, Male - renamed Maldiv Explorer, 1978 scrapped.



The 1958 built **MV Wimbledon** for Britain Steamship Co. Ltd., managed by Watts, Watts. In 1960 chartered to Port Line - renamed **Port Wimbledon**, 1965 reverted to **Wimbledon**, 1967 sold to National Shipping, Pakistan - renamed **Swat**, 1983 scrapped.

By 1959 Watts owned 9 motorships, through BSSC, but during the late 1960s it became clear that the market for break-bulk ships was in serious decline. Increased competition from globally acquired second-hand tonnage operating under FOCs, increasing fuel prices, political uncertainty regarding the future of UK shipping, not to mention the universal shift towards containerization, became a cocktail of gloom and doom for British ship owners.

In attempts to counter this, in the UK, several British shipowners decided to collaborate in 1966, to form **Seabridge Shipping Ltd.** The key members were **Bibby Line, BSSC, Clarkson, Silver Line, Bowring, and Furness Withy**. Each participant agreed to build bulk carriers that would be chartered to **Seabridge**, who would operate and market them. **BSSC** built a 42,000 grt Panamax bulk carrier, **Westminster Bridge**, but by the time it was delivered in 1968, Watts, Watts had decided that the potential rewards from ship owning were insufficient to justify the large capital investment and risk. By this time, all of BSSC's other ships had been sold or were in the process of being sold, so Watts, Watts were able to make an immediate clean sale of BSSC, its Seabridge interests, and the new bulk-carrier to Bibby Line. Watts, Watts remained in business, managing its old ships whilst they remained in service, until disposed of.



**MV Westminster Bridge**, but she only lasted 5 years with the Seabridge Consortium.

**MV Westminster Bridge**, was built by Britain Steamship Company Ltd in 1968 for the newly formed **Seabridge consortium**. Built by Lithgows Ltd., of Port Glasgow, she had a GRT 42,202 tons and was fitted with a 8 Cylinder B&W diesel engine developing 16,570 BHP. Sold by the Seabridge Consortium in 1973 and renamed **Proteus** and once again sold in 1985 becoming the **Philippine Roxas**. She was sent for demolition at Alang in 1988, under the demolition voyage name of **Pine**.

Like so many fine old British Shipping companies of the 1960-70s, they became uncompetitive, in main due to circumstances beyond their direct control, causing their demise and deletion from shipping annals and into oblivion, only to remain as distant history.

End

References: Britain Steamship (BSSC) and Watts, Watts & Company archives, Allen Collection, various Shipping Lists, and online data available in the Public Domain, from which additional material has been sourced.

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