

Ray Miller



taking a sideways look at the past, present and future

Rise of seaman Rowland

TO SAY William Rowland came from 'humble origins' would be something of an understatement. Within a relatively few short years he had gone from being a seaman working on sailing vessels carrying stone from North Wales to the Mersey to becoming a wealthy ship owner in his own right.

Testimony to his meteoric rise can still be seen in the shape of the magnificent Lawson House in Moughland Lane, Runcorn, which he built for his family home. He called it Everley. Later it became Lawson House, part of the ICI empire, and now a three-star hotel, though that will change when it is sold to housing developers.

Rowland was born in Runcorn in February 1841 when the town's port was booming and life on Runcorn's flats and schooners must have appeared to a hard-working young man as offering good prospects.

Rowland progressed steadily, becoming a master in his late twenties and, by the age of 30, he had accumulated enough capital to take 21 shares in the sailing ship *Charles*. It was a familiar sight on the North Wales run and was so engaged when lost in the Dee Estuary 12 years later.

Generally, Runcorn ship owners were reluctant to take to steam, but Rowland and his partners clearly saw this as the way ahead and in 1881 they had the wooden *Thames* built and engine at Northwich. Rowland initially took 16 shares as did two others, including the manager of a salt works, giving a clue to her intended trade. The first steamer wholly registered in



NAMED IN HIS HONOUR: Delivered from Troon in 1904, the *Rowland* vessel, seen here, was named in his honour.

Rowland's name was the wooden *Lady Kate* in 1884.

About this time Rowland's name appears as the owner of the ageing Baltic-built barquentine *Windsor*, sold to Liverpool owners in 1886.

Despite this flirtation with sail, Rowland was carefully advancing the size and sophistication of the ships he owned, adding the iron coasters *Hebe* and *Opale*, *Tasler* and the wooden *Rowland Castle*.

Rowland's fleet remained relatively stable during the latter part of the century, increasing again when the *Mis* was bought in 1896 but declining again with the loss of the *Hebe* during a December gale in 1897.

Rowland also invested in other

people's ships, buying shares in the steamer *Zillah* in 1891. However, his name was notably absent from the list of investors in his son Alfred's ship-owning ventures, which also began in 1891, suggesting a rift in the family. However, in 1901 and 1902 Alfred began acquiring shares in some of his father's ships, including the *Jessie*, *Annie* and *Blanche*.

As if to show his sights were on more distant horizons, Rowland moved his business from his home in Runcorn to an office in Canning Place, Liverpool, towards the end of the 1890s. Dramatic expansion followed and between 1898 and 1905 eight steamers were built for the fleet at Ayr, Troon and Dublin. The coasters took the names of his daughters, of whom there were five. The coasters were 1400-1500t long and consisted of a type widely used in the Irish Sea.

During the late 1880s Rowland was also heavily involved in the gravel trade and a few years later his coasters were able to bring gravel cargoes from Walney Island and Fleetwood to Liverpool and, most likely, up the fairly new Manchester Ship Canal.

Rowland died on May 4, 1903, at his home in Moughland Lane at the age of 62. Although he had never been a public figure, his funeral attracted considerable attention from the local newspapers. His obituary recalled his 'probity and rectitude'. They also spoke of his 'heavy' and 'generous' nature earning him considerable respect and

popularity. As befitted a Methodist, the papers reported, he was not an ostentatious man but his remains were interred in a rather ornate tomb in Runcorn Cemetery. A photograph of it was kindly provided for me by Eddie Owen, of South Road, Runcorn, who, along with the help of Percy Dunbavand and another gentleman, has catalogued 37,000 burials in Runcorn Cemetery.

Once again, Perry, a regular correspondent on this page, came up with the complete story of Rowland's remarkable career and even pictures of some of his vessels and I am indebted to him for his wonderful work.

It may be something of a cliché to say the Rowland story is truly one of rags to riches but that is exactly what it is.

Signs of discord in the family

FOLLOWING the delivery of the coaster *William Rowland*, named in the ship owner's honour, the next ship to arrive from Troon, and the final member of the series, was the *Jane Rowland*, named after the owner's widow.

According to William Rowland's will, his share holdings in his ships were to be distributed among his wife, daughters and three sons. His executors included his son, William Rowland, who worked in his father's office.

Alfred, the most successful businessman among Rowland's sons, who had been buying shares in

many of his father's ships, was set to become managing owner - in effect, controlling the ships.

Apparently, not all the family were happy about this and from August 1906 High Court rulings prevented any transfer of shares in *William Rowland* and some other ships until December 1906. Matters were then settled and, in January 1907, almost four years after William Rowland's death, Alfred Rowland became manager of the *William Rowland* and *Jane Rowland*.

Reflecting Alfred's unsentimental approach to business, the entire fleet was sold off over the next few years, forming the nucleus of a fast-expanding Liverpool fleet - that of James and John Munks. Alfred Rowland's career as a ship owner was more



LAWSON HOUSE: Once part of ICI's portfolio, the three-star Lawson House hotel on Moughland Lane is to be sold off to housing developers Morris Homes. The historic hotel's main building will also be converted. The property was built in 1894 for ship owner William Rowland who started life as a seaman.

spectacular than that of his father but was not to end on such a high note. Alfred treated his ships as capital investments and was quite ready to buy and sell whenever profitable opportunities arose.

Fifty not out and still singing to sell-outs

RUNCORN singer Alan Watson is all set for his second appearance at The Brindley Arts Centre on Saturday after delighting a full house back in May.

The first concert marked Alan's 50th anniversary as an entertainer and the up and coming second night was sold-out early in August. Alan thanks all the fans who have

booked for this one and plans to donate proceeds to a charity helping orphans in Africa. Alan was able to donate £400 to Baiton Haven Hospice from the proceeds of the

excellent May concert.

Management of The Brindley Centre will put on two promotions featuring Alan next year, the first on February 11.

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