

PARKGATE AS A PORT

by G. W. Place, M.A.

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Thomas de Quincey, later known as the English Opium Eater, was just a schoolboy when he wrote to his sister Jane in 1800, about his impending return from a journey to Ireland:

We shall get to Dublin on or before Wednesday night, and shall sail by the first Parkgate packet. I suppose you have enough geography to know that Parkgate is situated near Chester, on the River Dee, twice as far from Dublin as Holyhead. This passage is very dangerous, so that they are often obliged to put in at different ports and wait several weeks. Persons are in general no more than three days going over, but sometimes much longer.

Young Thomas had crossed to Ireland from Holyhead, and so exaggerated both the dangers of the Parkgate passage and its usual duration. However, he wrote on the same day to his other sister Mary to say, 'Lord Altamont [the Earl of Altamont, his host in Ireland] and Dean Browne were six weeks on this passage once, being obliged continually to put in at different ports'.¹

Parkgate was one of the principal points of embarkation for passengers to Ireland for roughly one hundred years, between about 1710 and 1810. During the 17th century, although Parkgate was occasionally recorded as an anchorage, the usual point of embarkation was Neston Quay or the New Quay, known as the New Haven when it was constructed in the mid 16th century by the City of Chester, about a mile up river from Parkgate. Students of the Dee estuary have not always realised, misled perhaps by the changes in name, that the New Quay remained in use for so long. However, Sir Richard Grenville wrote a letter in 1641 from the New Quay, where his men had to wait for a ship to be repaired; in 1689, Colonel Sir Thomas Bellingham slept at the Key House after landing at Neston; and the Duke of Ormonde, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, landed at Neston in 1704.²

At that point, the activities of privateers encouraged by the War of Spanish Succession brought all normal trade to a halt, and merchant vessels had to cross

¹ H. A. Eaton, *Thomas de Quincey*, 1936; ed. Japp, *Quincey Memorials*, 1890.

² Cheshire Record Office, Cowper (Crewe) Collection, Ref. DCC 14/28; *Cheshire Sheaf*, Nov. 1940, p. 64; *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic*, 22 Mar. 1704.

the Irish Sea under escort by warships. When peace returned, Neston was never again recorded as a point of embarkation, and Parkgate blossomed as a port.

Even though the shifting sands of Dee had brought favour to Parkgate, it was never regarded as a good anchorage. The Collector of Customs at Chester had advised the Committee for the Affairs of Ireland in 1689 that only those ships which could safely lie aground should use Parkgate, but that larger ships or those not built to lie aground, should use Hoylake. The year before the Customs had established a boat station at Parkgate, as a means of keeping an eye on the Dee shipping, and once there, insisted on retaining Parkgate as a 'legal quay' where goods could be examined, despite the protests of the City Assembly in Chester which declared in 1707 that Parkgate 'is now become a very dangerous place for ships to lye in for lading and unloading of goods'.³ When the Bill for Chester's New Cut, which canalised the Dee, was being discussed before Parliament in 1732, Captain Stephens deposed that 'Parkgate is a very bad and dangerous harbour for ships to lie at, they being very much exposed to the winds, and their bottoms are often damaged by running on ground'.⁴ Nor did the anchorage improve later in the century. Admiralty sailing instructions for Parkgate in 1794 advised, 'Vessels must lie aground on the beach below the houses, because the strength of the stream would make a vessel drag her anchor'.⁵

Despite these disadvantages, Parkgate soon became fashionable as a port for Ireland, and passengers preferred the easy access from Chester despite 120 miles by sea to Dublin, as opposed to a difficult land journey to Holyhead followed by only sixty miles by sea. In the 17th century the journey through Wales could be described as 'the most heathenish country ever any man travelled', and even in 1764 it could be said that 'the passage from Parkgate [is] much the easiest and most convenient, as it is very troublesome and expensive getting heavy luggage for ninety miles over the mountainous country, wide and rapid ferry ways of Wales'.⁶ By the 1760s, though, the advent of turnpike roads was already beginning to make the journey to Holyhead less daunting.

One factor in promoting the claims of Parkgate was the patronage of the Royal Yachts. These were Royal Naval vessels put at the disposal of the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and the first of them to sail in time of peace, the RY *Dublin*, built in 1709, was also the first to use Parkgate, where it carried Jonathan Swift in 1710:

I got into the boat at Dublin, after which the rogues made a new bargain and forced me to give them two crowns, and talked as if we should not be able to overtake any ship, but in half an hour we got to the Yacht, for the ships lay by to wait for my Lord Lieutenant's Steward. We made our voyage

³ *Calendar of Treasury Books*, 17 Oct., 30 Oct., 12 Nov. 1689; 18 June 1688. Chester City Record Office, Assembly Book, Ref. AB/3 f.156 (5 Dec. 1707).

⁴ *Journal of the House of Commons*, vol. 21, 24 Feb. 1732.

⁵ Admiralty Hydrographic Dept. Library, no. 682.

⁶ *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic*, 5 Oct. 1668; J. Bush (ed.), *Hibernia Curiosa*, 1769.

in 15 hours just. I got a fall off my horse, riding here [Chester] from Parkgate, but no hurt; the horse understanding falls very well, and lying quiet till I got up.⁷

The RY *Dublin* continued to call regularly at Parkgate until it was broken up in 1752. Its successor, the RY *Dorset*, was built in 1753 and continued to sail between Dublin and Parkgate until 1812, when it underwent lengthy repairs before being sold. The next Royal Yacht, the *William & Mary*, seems never to have called at Parkgate.⁸

The Royal Yachts were much smaller than naval fighting vessels, and so were able to enter the Dee estuary. The RY *Dublin* was 148 tons, and the RY *Dorset* 164 tons, whereas a 5th rate man of war like *Hector* was 493 tons, and the 6th rate *Valeur* was 321 tons, both ships which did convoy duty between Hoylake and Dublin in the years 1704 and 1706.⁹ A 1st rate man of war towards the end of the 18th century could be over 2,000 tons. By comparison, the largest vessel known to have reached Parkgate, the *Stanislaus Angus* in 1765, was 300 tons and regretted entering the estuary where she damaged her keel.¹⁰ Few vessels of more than 150 tons are known to have used Parkgate.

In theory, the Royal Yacht was intended to carry the Lord Lieutenant and other government officers, and official despatches. Originally, the yachts' captains had been forbidden to take other than official passengers to avoid competition with the Holyhead packets (perhaps an additional reason to use Parkgate) but it soon became established that anyone with sufficient social standing could obtain an official warrant to travel free of charge, or 'for victuals only' as the ships' muster books have it, whereas passengers without warrants could travel unofficially by arrangement with the captain. Usually there was plenty of room. When the Duke of Devonshire crossed in 1738 as Lord Lieutenant, he had a retinue of thirty eight persons.¹¹ There were usually far fewer, if any, official passengers: for example, in 1732 'a warrant was passed last Saturday for the Yacht to be at Holyhead, to bring over the Rev. Dr. Delany and his lady, from Chester'.¹² That was the first Mrs. Delany. The letters of the second Mrs. Delany provide an insight on how the system worked at Parkgate. In 1744 she wrote:

We removed from Chester to Parkgate in hopes of sailing early on Monday, but the wind was contrary, and we were obliged to remain there all day. We were so lucky as to get a very clean, good lodging, and on Tuesday morning went on board the Yacht.

⁷ J. Swift, *Journal to Stella*, Letter 1, 2 Sep. 1710.

⁸ J. J. Colledge, *Ships of the Royal Navy*, 1969.

⁹ *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic*, Mar. 1704.

¹⁰ Glegg Family Account Book, Folio E, 27 Sep. 1765.

¹¹ *Calendar of Treasury Books*, 14 Sep. 1696; Public Record Office, Muster Book of RY *Dublin*, Ref. ADM 36/898.

¹² *Dublin Journal*, 10 Oct. 1732.

However, on that occasion her name was not entered on the Muster Roll, so she had no warrant. In 1758, though, when she wrote while waiting at Parkgate, 'I cannot think any place disagreeable with such a constant moving picture of ships, sea plants on the beach, seaweed and shells', the names of 'The Dean of Down and Mrs. Delany' do appear on the Muster Roll.¹³

The Royal Yacht did not always sail to Parkgate, and it was not always available for passengers; in 1789 the Lord Lieutenant himself was obliged to travel in the *Princess Royal* packet.¹⁴ The aristocracy and gentry, however, preferred to travel on the yacht if they could, because there were sometimes disadvantages with other vessels, as will be seen.

Passengers were often delayed at Parkgate by contrary winds, and the impatient ones might then venture to Holyhead. Jonathan Swift did so in 1727, and bitterly regretted it:

Lo here I sit at Holyhead
With muddy ale and mouldy bread
All Christian vittals stink of fish
I'm where my enemies would wish.
Convict of lies is every sign,
The inn has not one drop of wine.
I'm fastened both by wind and tide
I see the ship at anchor ride
The captain swears the sea's too rough
He has not passengers enough
And thus the Dean is forced to stay
Till others come to help the pay.

Whereupon the writers Gay and Pope, who were expecting him in Dublin, wrote to say:

Our advices from Chester tell us that you met Captain Lawson [of the RY *Dublin*]; the captain was a man of veracity, and set sail at the time he told you; I really wished you had laid hold of that opportunity, for you had then been in Ireland the next day: besides, as it is credibly reported, the captain had a bottle or two of excellent claret in his cabin. You would not then have had the plague of that little smoky room at Holyhead.¹⁵

The trick by captains of delaying until enough passengers appeared, which Swift suspected at both ports, was constantly complained of. John Wesley ruefully prescribed three rules for those crossing the Irish Sea:

Never pay till you set sail,
Go not on board till the captain goes on board,
Send not your baggage on board till you go yourself.

¹³ Lady Llanover (ed.), *Letters of Mary Granville*, 28 June 1744, 30 June 1758; P.R.O., Muster Book, Ref. ADM 36/7115.

¹⁴ *Chester Chronicle*, 3 July 1789.

¹⁵ J. Swift, *Holyhead Journal*, 1727; H. Williams (ed.), *Swift's Correspondence*, 1963.

Wesley is said to have crossed to or from Ireland forty two times, and on nine occasions he is known to have used Parkgate. He was too restless a traveller to brook any delay, and on a further three occasions he recorded that he would not wait. In 1765, 'As several ships were ready to sail from Parkgate, I waited there for two days; but the wind continuing foul, I crossed over to Liverpool'.

For those who did not sail in the Royal Yacht, there were plenty of merchant vessels which carried general cargo between Parkgate and Dublin, and these ships would carry passengers if that was the type of cargo available. When John Wesley went on board the *Nonpareil* in 1762, he found his cabin full of hops. In 1771, 'I embarked on board the *Kildare*, abundantly the best and cleanest ship which I have sailed in for many years', and it is recorded in the Customs accounts that, on the same voyage, the *Kildare* carried a cargo of merchandise and horses. Five months later, 'I embarked on board the *Nonpareil* for Parkgate with a small fair wind, so that the sea was as smooth as a looking-glass', yet it is known that both the *Kildare* and the *Nonpareil* were carrying coal and lead to Dublin that year, though not on the dates that Wesley travelled.¹⁶

Before about 1710, travellers wishing to go abroad were required to obtain an official pass, but the practice lapsed just as Parkgate was becoming established.¹⁷ Travel became progressively more popular throughout the 18th century, and the means of doing so, for example the turnpike roads, improved accordingly. In due course there seemed to be enough custom to justify specialist passenger ships at Parkgate. The *Chester Chronicle* recorded the event in 1785:

On Wednesday was launched at Parkgate a new vessel called the King, Richard Hammond commander, burthen about 100 tons, fitted up with very elegant accommodations for the reception of nobility, gentry and others; for their conveyance between Dublin and Parkgate; at which place another packet of like burthen, to be called the Queen, is now building, to be launched in two or three months, and to be fitted with the like elegant accommodations.

These two packets called the King and Queen, we hear, are to be in one joint concern with a packet called the Prince of Wales, commanded by Captain Heird, who has been for some months past in the passage trade between Dublin, Holyhead and Parkgate. It is not doubted that the passage trade will regain what it has for some years back (for want of such packets) been deprived of by a neighbouring port.

The loss of confidence in Parkgate, implied in the newspaper report, was caused by two serious shipwrecks in 1775. The *Trevor* and the *Nonpareil* were both lost in a single storm, with the loss of every life but one. And not only lives:

The *Trevor* and the *Nonpareil* had on board near 200 passengers, also £6,000 in spices, besides silks, woollen cloths, jewels and other things, to the amount of between £30,000 and £40,000.¹⁸

¹⁶ J. Wesley, *Journal*, 1 Apr. 1762, 26 Apr. 1765; 20 Mar., 22 Aug. 1771.

¹⁷ P.R.O., Treasury Papers, Ref. TI/127.

¹⁸ *Chester Chronicle*, 2 Sep. 1785, 19 Oct. 1775.

As a result, a subscription was raised and an Act obtained to build a lighthouse at the Point of Ayr, and provision was made for licensed pilotage in the estuary. There followed the War of American Independence, with the usual halt in trade which privateers in the Irish Sea produced, and it was when peace returned and travel boomed again that the Parkgate Packet Company was formed, encouraged by confidence in the new navigational aids. The company soon flourished, and the *Chester Directory* of 1787 listed four Dublin packets at Parkgate: the *King*, Capt. Hervey; the *Queen*, Capt. Miller; the *Prince of Wales*, Capt. Heird; the *Princess Royal*, Capt. Brown.

The interest and reputation of Neston and Parkgate have of late been not a little increased by the extensive and brilliant patronage shown to the Parkgate packets; which, from the regularity of their sailing, the excellence of their accommodations, and every other advantage, seem to have a decided advantage over all others; and in consequence, Parkgate is become the resort of elegance and fashion. These packets sail regularly at least four times a week.¹⁹

Despite the growing challenge from both Liverpool and Holyhead, the Parkgate Packet Company continued to do well despite the loss of the packet *Queen* in 1796. In 1806, though, faced with competition at Parkgate itself, the Company decided to buy a new ship, the *King George*. Unhappily, after only a few weeks the new ship was wrecked with the loss of about a hundred lives. The company did not survive the loss for long, and after 1808 very little passenger traffic is recorded.

Although passengers formed the most important part of Parkgate's commerce, there was always a steady trade in merchandise. Before the Dee was canalised into the New Cut in 1737, it was frequently necessary for vessels which sought to sail to Chester, to unload all or part of their cargo further down the estuary. It was claimed in 1732:

For some time past the navigation hath been so lost, that ships have been forced to stop at Park-gate, eight miles below Chester towards the sea, and all goods and merchandizes exported and imported from and to Chester, are sent to and from Parkgate, either by land carriage at an expence of 6s per ton, or by small boats at an expence of 2s per ton, to be put on board such ships.²⁰

The New Cut was designed to end this practice, but in certain cases it continued. In the contract for the *Elizabeth & Rebecca* to carry iron in 1752 from Petersburg to Chester, it was stated:

In case it shall be found necessary to ease the ship, the master will take out one sloop load of her said cargo at Parkgate or Dawpool.²¹

¹⁹ *Directory of Chester*, 1787.

²⁰ British Library, *The Case of the Cheesemongers*, 1732, Ref. 357, c. 1. 28.

²¹ Chester City R.O., Town Clerk: Private Practice — letters, Ref. TC/P/L/1/50.

Yet goods leaving Chester also frequently went to Parkgate: in 1740, out of ninety four ships which left Chester, twenty four went to Parkgate, most of them with cheese.²² The reason for this was that they picked up lead. It was customary for the London Lead Company to ship lead from their smelting mill near Bagillt straight across the estuary to Parkgate, where it acted as ballast for the cheese ships.²³

The direct trade of ships from Parkgate was almost entirely with Dublin, and at any one time there would be about six regulars in that trade. The *Chester Directory* of 1782 listed five 'Captains in the Dublin Trade', living at Parkgate. A great many more cargo ships than this visited Parkgate, though many of them came only once. During the last quarter of the century, of 169 ships which came to Parkgate, only forty one came more than once. The usual imports were live-stock or animal products, such as hides, coney wool, glue or 'dried sheep's guts to make whips'.²⁴ Some linen came in, but most of the linen went straight to Chester. Very little Customs revenue was collected at Parkgate: in 1759, £149 was collected at Parkgate compared with £8,058, or fifty four times as much, taken at Chester.²⁵

Apart from those occasional ships which came to Parkgate because they had a suitable cargo, a large number found themselves there through the accident of storms, or visited the ship repairers. During the five years from 1763 to 1768, for which an account survives of statements sworn before a notary public, mostly to record damage to ships or their cargoes, thirty four ships came to Parkgate in trouble of some kind.²⁶ Some ships started at Parkgate because they were built at Thomas Makin's yard between 1785 and 1791. Cargo vessels, as well as passengers, were therefore of great importance to the village.

There was another, and quite different, aspect to Parkgate's function as a port, connected with the regular migrations of Irish labourers. An eyewitness account of 1742 states:

We see every day vessels coming from Dublin, with great numbers of passengers for London, of all kinds, from men of rank to the lowest station; for as our harvest in England is earlier than in Ireland, they begin about London, work their way down to the west, and get back to their own country, time enough for their business there.²⁷

Here is a later description of about 1780:

The holds of the packets sailing from Dublin to Parkgate and Liverpool might be seen crowded with poor wretches, who, after paying half-a-crown for their passage, had scarcely as much more money to defray the expenses of

²² Cheshire R.O., River Dee Navigation: Register of Ships, Ref. QDN 1/5.

²³ A. Raistrick, *Two Centuries of Industrial Welfare: the London (Quaker) Lead Company*, 1938.

²⁴ Chester City R.O., Comptrollers Subsidy Account Parkgate, Ref. CAS/17.

²⁵ P.R.O., Chester Customs Accounts, Ref. E 190 1433/5.

²⁶ Glegg Family Account Book, Folio E.

²⁷ W.R.C[hewood] (ed.), *A Tour Through Ireland*, 1746.

their journey to the counties situated near the Metropolis. This journey they generally performed barefooted, because they were obliged to spare their shoes for certain kinds of work which could not be performed without them.²⁸

When these harvest migrations began is uncertain, but they may well have been important in establishing Parkgate as a port, for the 'spalpeens' would have wanted to land as close to London as they could, without a long, harsh walk through North Wales. The risk of storms apart, their sea journey was not always smooth. In 1794, about fifteen Irish haymakers were given whisky by a recruiting sergeant during their passage from Ireland, and were induced to change clothes with his party of soldiers. On landing at Parkgate they found themselves in uniform, and the sergeant claimed them; but the magistrates discharged them at Chester.²⁹

There were also less fortunate Irish people who came through Parkgate in large numbers: these were vagrants who were being returned to their parishes of origin under the Poor Laws. From 1750 to 1815, the County of Cheshire operated a House of Correction at Neston, and for the first fifty years the accounts, which list every vagrant by name, have survived.³⁰ Besides telling a sad tale of human misery, these accounts also give valuable information about the sailing conditions at Parkgate. An average of 500 people a year were repatriated on ships which were obliged by law to take them. As the authorities were anxious to avoid maintaining the vagrants for longer than necessary, the delays to sailing caused by adverse winds were accurately recorded. A month's wait was not uncommon. In 1775, there was a delay of eight weeks, during which time the unfortunate vagrants were put on board ship four times, only to have to return to the House of Correction when the wind remained adverse. Their diet was meagre, and a long wait would soon cause illness. In 1773, the local doctor stated on his bill to the County that he had attended vagrants 'who from their long confinement and the inclemency of the weather were extremely ill'. The longest recorded delay between sailings was sixty five days, or more than nine weeks, in 1757.

Any ship leaving Parkgate for Dublin could be required to take vagrants, with the exception of the Royal Yacht which, as a naval vessel, was not subject to ordinary civil law. When the Parkgate Packet Company was formed, the following letter was written to the County Treasurer:

Sir, The Captains of the Parkgate Packetts which have for upwards of twelve months past taken over the Vagrants to Dublin, are (as they inform me) Determined to take no more of them at 2s 4d Head freight, except what the Law Compels them to take, as they too often experience that the Allowance made them for Sea Store is often devour'd before the Vessell gets over the Barr and by having a long Passage, they must starve if the Captain did not relieve them — they are very inconvenient to people of fashion — this matter I have been desired to signifie to you.

²⁸ R. Bell, *A Description of the Condition . . . of the Irish Peasantry*, 1804.

²⁹ *Chester Chronicle*, 6 June 1794.

³⁰ Cheshire R.O., Quarter Sessions Files 1750-1800, Ref. QJF 178-228.

The result of this letter was an increase in the payment to the captain as well as in the allowance to the vagrants, but the requirement to carry the vagrants remained. The great majority of passengers through Parkgate were, therefore, either harvest labourers or vagrants.

It is the records of the House of Correction, scrappy though they are after 1802, which provide the most accurate clues to the end of Parkgate as a port. In other records such as newspapers or *Lloyds Lists*, Parkgate just fades away. The Parkgate Packet Company ceased to rent their store in the village in 1809; a single packet is recorded in 1811; the RY *Dorset* last landed passengers at Parkgate in October 1812. There must have been some shipping in the next three years because payments were still being made for vagrants at the House of Correction, but in July 1815:

The magistrates of this county have given notice by circulars, that the Dublin packets do not now sail from Parkgate but from Liverpool. Magistrates are requested to direct passes in future to Liverpool.³¹

The reasons for the demise of Parkgate seem to have been the increasing efficiency of Liverpool as a port for Dublin, and the appeal of a deep water port compared with the increasing navigational difficulties of the shallow Dee as ships increased in size; and the steady improvement of the roads to Holyhead, particularly after the Act of Union in 1800 when the Irish Members of Parliament, led by Sir Henry Parnell, insisted that communications be improved.

The port lingered for a few years: in 1820, the Customs reported that the only activity at Parkgate concerned cattle imports, with coal being exported from nearby Ness Colliery.³² According to a paper delivered to the Chester Archaeological Society in 1875, the last packet ship to visit Parkgate was the *Besborough*, which ceased sailing in 1815.³³

³¹ P.R.O., *Chester Chronicle*, 28 July 1815.

³² P.R.O., Customs Letter Books, CUST 79/7.

³³ *Chester Chronicle*, 17 Apr. 1875.

