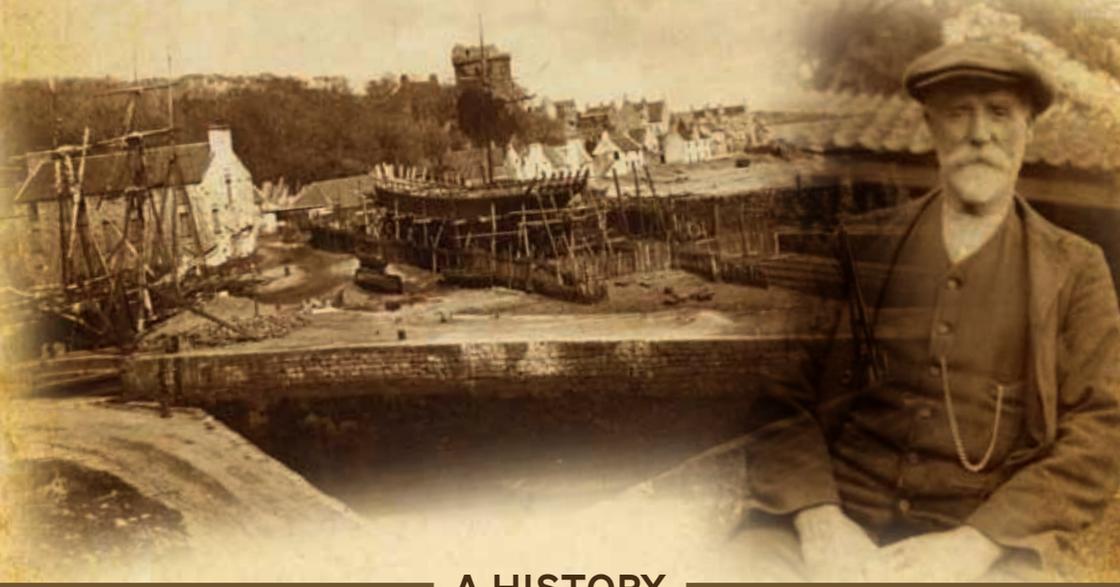
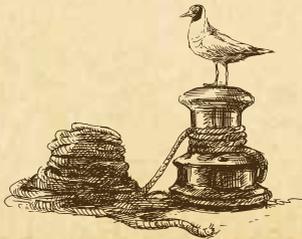


THE *Harbourmaster's* HOUSE

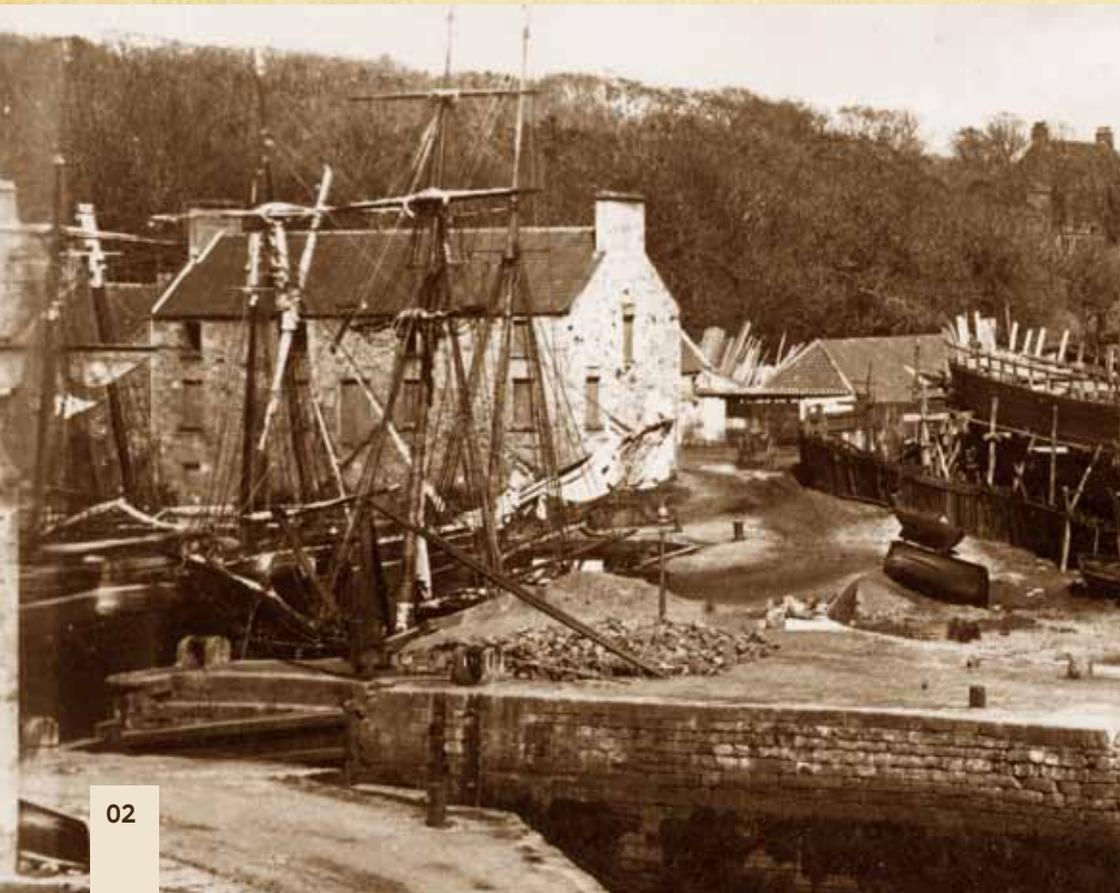


A HISTORY





The **Harbourmaster's House** has been standing at the foot of Hot Pot Wynd at Dysart harbour since around 1840, taking the place of a much earlier Shore House which was demolished in 1796.





^ Dysart harbour today

Looking at the peaceful harbour today with its fleet of small boats, it's hard to imagine what it was like when it was an important and very busy commercial port: when tall-masted sailing ships from foreign ports were packed so tightly that it was possible to walk across their decks from one side of the dock to the other. There was a brisk import and export trade with the Low Countries and the Baltic, with the tall ships bringing in a wide and varied amount of goods and taking away locally produced coal, salt and other items.

Harbourmaster's House c.1860 v



Although Dysart was recorded as a port as early as 1450, there was no real harbour, only a jetty in the bay opposite the houses at Pan Ha'. This gradually fell into disrepair, but the foundation stones can still be seen at low water at the largest spring tides three or four times a year. The present harbour was begun in the early 17th century when an east pier was built, with the overall structure being added to and changed by successive generations.

The ground floor of the Harbourmaster's house was used to store a wide variety of imported goods, as well as holding items which were exported from Fife. It must have had some of the sounds and scents of an eastern bazaar, as some of the items stored were oak bark, apples and onions, wine and spirits, timber, linseed oil, pantiles for Dysart roofs, flax, clay for Kirkcaldy potteries, tallow for candles, and books. There was a wide range of goods leaving Dysart for other ports: salt to Aberdeen and Inverness, bales of cloth to Leith, and tons upon tons of coal mined locally and brought down to the harbour by a never-ending stream of horses and carts.

In those days the building was three storeys high, before the pier was built up in front of it to cater for loading larger ships. It was also home to the harbourmaster, who played a key role in the activity of the harbour, and who was given the accommodation rent-free as part of his wages. The post of harbourmaster carried important duties: he recorded the time that each

incoming ship came in and allocated their berths, and put them into position in the inner dock and harbour. He also had to supervise the working of the dock gates, and collect the harbour dues which went to Dysart Town Council (before the amalgamation with Kirkcaldy in 1930) towards the upkeep of the harbour. The coal company owned by the Earl of Rosslyn who lived in Dysart House (now the Carmelite Monastery) was paid per ton by customers ordering coal.

**“it must have had
some of the sounds
and scents of an
eastern bazaar”**

The old Dysart Town Council Minutes from the mid-1800s show a steady procession of harbourmasters, some of whom ended their careers in a variety of sorry circumstances. Probably the most dramatic was in 1900 when the harbourmaster left the dock sluice gates open after high water, and the schooner *Speculator* was badly damaged. Lawyers' letters flew between the Town Council and the ship's owners, who finally accepted £100 in compensation, a fair amount in those days. There was also the opportunity — as in any public office where there are cash transactions — of being less than honest with the harbour dues, a discrepancy which was brought to light when a second check on the coal tonnage was made by the weigh man.

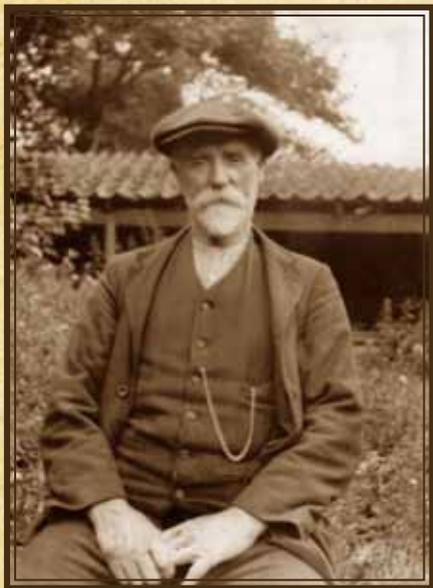
The first man to be recorded in the post was John Robertson, who was appointed around 1850, followed in fairly quick succession by Thomas Turnbull, Andrew Dick, David Hume and then Captain Andrew Thomson, who resigned in 1882. When Captain Thomson left his post, the *Fifeshire Advertiser* of the time reported: "Twelve applications for the office of harbourmaster were submitted to the Town Council meeting, and the Council appointed Mr John Harrow to fill the office."

Four years later, the Council considered Mr Harrow's application for a rise, again noted in the local paper. "An application had been received from Mr Harrow, harbourmaster, for an increase of salary. His present salary was £1 weekly, with free house. He was a very attentive

man, and the Provost was not against him receiving an increase, although the work had been done by Mr Hume at a very small salary and had given great satisfaction, as had Captain Thomson, and he did not think the duties were increased." One councillor thought he should receive a little increase, as his wages were not large. Another pointed out that the harbourmaster must be up at all the tides and that he did his work well. After a prolonged discussion, it was agreed to increase his wages by two shillings a week. The rise, though not excessive, must have been enough to satisfy John Harrow who retired in 1900 at a good age; he had in fact tried to retire previously but was persuaded to stay on, to the detriment of his health. He was succeeded by Edwin Coatsworth, who was often seen accompanied by his dog Toby.

Harbourmaster's House c.1923 ✓





^ Andrew Dryburgh

In 1906 Andrew Dryburgh, one of the most notable of Dysart's harbourmasters, was appointed. There was a shipbuilding yard at the harbour at that time, which built and then later repaired ships, and as a young man he served his apprenticeship there. He then enlisted for the crew of the newly-built clipper *Cutty Sark* on her maiden voyage as carpenter's mate, finishing up as ship's carpenter. He lived in Vancouver Island for nine years where he must have got on to a sound financial footing, as on his return to Dysart, he bought over the same shipyard where he had begun his working life, as well as taking on the harbourmaster's post. The last harbourmaster to be employed by Dysart Town Council, and the last to occupy the house, was William Geldart.

Harbourmaster's House c.1934 v



There was an even quicker turnover of pilots, who were employed by Trinity House and who were not under the jurisdiction of the Town Council. Although there must have been a good number of pilots who carried out their duties carefully and honestly, there were also quite a few who were downright rogues who made it their aim to add to their wages by some sharp practices. Some pilots were fined for letting ships run aground, or for refusing to take ships out of the harbour. There was a set scale of charges for ships coming in and out of the harbour, but the pilots could ask the ships' masters (especially those who were new to the port) for an inflated fee and then pocket the difference. With perhaps a dozen ships a week going in or out of the harbour, the pilots could make a sizeable income with their extra charges, most of which they spent in the local pubs.

This practice was tried out once too often by Thomas Cairns, a colourful character whose pilot's licence was withdrawn twice for "violent and outrageous conduct", but who was reinstated after a successful petition signed by 300 local people. His scheme to get more than the standard charges from visitors met with some opposition from a Danish skipper who objected strongly and produced a revolver to underline his disapproval. Cairns knocked the revolver out of his hand, but the skipper went down to his cabin and appeared with a rifle. By that time Cairns and his companion had jumped into their own small boat and rowed to safety pursued by shots from the captain.

Ships which came in without cargoes were loaded with ballast such as stones and large boulders, often tipped overboard or removed by horse and cart and dumped on the beach: even today there are pieces of rocks on the foreshore which started off in the fjords of Norway. The off-loaded stones began to block up the harbour, and a tunnel was built through the cliff face with rails laid down for trucks to take away the ballast. The tunnel is still there, although the ground level has been raised over the years, making a passage between the harbour and the start of Pathhead sands.

“Some pilots were fined for letting ships **run aground**, or for refusing to take ships out of the harbour”

Kirkcaldy folk spent a lot of their leisure time going along to Dysart harbour to watch the busy scene. “It was quite a Sunday expedition with your parents and the family, to go along Sailors' Walk where you were level with the top of the masts of all the boats that were in Dysart dock,” said one elderly man, recalling days in the early 20th century. “It would be so full of ships that you wondered how they ever got them in or

out. They were packed in, every space seemed to be filled up. They were in for coal, and the Dysart pit was just a few hundred yards along so the horses and carts brought the coal down. A carter would bring along two horses and his two carts to the big chute at the side, and he just emptied his cart straight down into the hold.”

And a great-grandmother remembered as a very small girl being taken for a walk with her grandfather every weekend to the harbour to see the ships in the dock. “I looked over the side of the harbour and saw the coal chutes going down into the ships,” she said. “One day I lost my balance and slid down one of the chutes, but my grandfather got me back up again.”

The huts at the end of the harbour were originally the premises of the Dysart Swimming Club and Humane Society, formed in 1888 to teach local youngsters to swim — a necessary skill for youngsters who played near the edge of the dock. The buildings were used as changing huts, with separate accommodation for men and women in those Victorian times. During World War I, soldiers were billeted in the huts and the harbour was out of bounds to civilians during the war. Two other small buildings still stand nearby; the pilots’ hut facing the dock gates, and the stowers’ bothy for the men who shovelled coal into the waiting boats.

In a bid to attract bigger ships, the dock was cleaned out and deepened in 1924. Unfortunately, this proved to be counter-productive, as the temporary

closure of the harbour attracted ships to Burntisland or Methil docks instead. Fife Coal Company, which was then the major user of the harbour, refused to reimburse Dysart Town Council for the work done — a catastrophic financial blow. This was quickly followed by the closure of the Lady Blanche pit for economic reasons, and in 1929 the harbour was closed as a commercial port and there was no further need for a harbourmaster.

“In a bid to attract **bigger ships**, the dock was cleaned out and deepened in 1924”

It lay virtually unused for twenty years and it seemed unlikely that it would ever be open to ships again. The very existence of the harbour was under threat in the early 1960s, when there was a proposal by Kirkcaldy Town Council to fill it in completely.

Fortunately, the tide turned in 1967, when the harbour was taken over by the newly formed Dysart Sailing Club who restored it to full use for small boats after many years of hard and determined work by club members. The club then employed Will Carr in 1972 as harbourmaster, a post he held until he was over 80. Although the boats he dealt with were a different size than the tall-masted sailing ships

of his childhood, he remembered them well. "When I was a lad, I remember seeing the harbour full of sailing ships," he recalled. "They had to enter port under sail with the tide, and it was a great thing to see those three-masted big ships with their crew scampering through the rigging. There would be maybe eight tall ships in port, with two or three others anchored in the Forth waiting to get in. There were a lot of foreign ships such as the *Herald*, a Norwegian ship which made the fastest sailing ever from Norway in 48 hours – well, that's what the crew told us anyhow.

"When a ship needed repair, it had to be pulled out of the water by a big wheel with cogs, and chains which were thicker than my arm attached to the ship. It need a dozen men to walk round this great wheel to move the cogs. They said that by the time the ship was pulled on to the land, the men had walked the equivalent distance as from here to Burntisland and back again."

By that time, the Harbourmaster's House had undergone a sea change in use. Mrs Geldart, widow of the last harbourmaster, still occupied part of the house until the mid-1950s. By the early 1960s, part of the building was used as the premises of Archibald Shanks, firewood merchant, while a young art student used part of the cellar as his makeshift studio. Shortly afterwards, Dysart Sailing Club leased the building to use as its clubhouse, and members had space to build and repair their boats, with the upper floor being used to spread out sails to dry.

By 1994 however it was becoming obvious that the building was becoming dangerous and needed a lot of work to put right. The upper floors were riddled with dry rot and the general condition of the building was deteriorating. The sailing club agreed to move their headquarters to the nearby Oil Shed, and for some years there were very real fears for the future safety of the building as it was left empty at the mercy of the elements, vandals and an ever-growing colony on pigeons.

Initial plans in 1996 by a whisky company to convert it into offices, flats and a heritage centre fell through. However, in 2000 as part of a new Regeneration Initiative, the first stage began to renovate the B-listed building, when work started to strip out the interior and make the exterior windproof and water-tight, funded by Fife Council and Fife Enterprise.

Two years later, applications were invited from firms or individuals to either buy or lease the Harbourmaster's House and turn it into a viable business concern. Interest was shown for a wide variety of uses, including luxury holiday apartments, artists' workshops and gallery, restaurant and lounge, Scottish music centre, loft apartments, and offices. None of these plans were suitable, mainly because at that stage the start-up costs for a business in a building which had neither floors nor services would have been prohibitive.

The turning point came when Amanda McFarlane, the Chief Executive of Fife Coast and Countryside Trust which was

then based temporarily in Leven, was walking along the Fife Coastal Path. Her attention was struck by the empty building at the edge of the harbour, and there and then she decided that this would be the perfect place for the Trust's permanent headquarters. After a lengthy consultation process involving Fife Council, Fife Coast and Countryside Trust, and local voluntary organisations the Dysart Trust and Dysart Regeneration Forum, a massive £1m redevelopment programme was put in place.

Work started in October 2005 to transform the building into offices, interpretation centre, community room and bistro. The work was not without its challenges: the interior of the building had to be gutted and fitted out from scratch with modern technology, disabled access, a glass lift, kitchen and toilets. A time capsule with information on Dysart past and present gathered by the Dysart Trust and local primary school children, was sealed up in one of the walls.



^ Harbourmaster's House today

The renovated building was officially open in September 2006 by Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown (then Chancellor of the Exchequer as well as MP for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) and Patsy Curran, great-grand-daughter of harbourmaster Andrew Dryburgh. Patsy also brought with her the tiny doll which Andrew had brought back with him from the maiden voyage of the *Cutty Sark*.

Since then, the Harbourmaster's House has gone from strength to strength, with several awards including a Gold Award in the Green Business Tourism Scheme, and a 4-Star visitor attraction award from VisitScotland. It has become an integral part of the Fife Coastal Path for thousands of visitors, many of whom have been inspired by the displays in the interpretation centre showing the beauty spots on the 117 mile walk from Kincardine to Newburgh, and learned something of the history of Dysart and its harbour, before sampling the delights of the bistro overlooking the water.

The Harbourmaster's House is open 7 days a week and is free of charge. For further information visit the website on **www.theharbourmastershouse.co.uk**

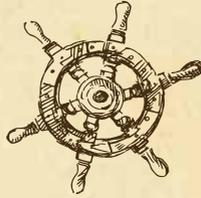
The harbourmasters of yesterday would surely have been pleased to see their old building still playing an important part in today's harbour life, allowing visitors and local people to appreciate the beauty of this historic part of Fife.



^ Three Pilots

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Fife Coast and Countryside Trust is a Registered Scottish Company (SC216254) and a Registered Scottish Charity (SC031247). Its registered office is at The Harbourmaster's House, Dysart, Fife, KY1 2TQ.

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