



Paddle Steamers

Between the 1820s and the 1960s paddle steamers worked the Bristol Channel taking thousands of passengers on trips to and from Weston-super-Mare. With their flat bottoms, they were ideally suited to work in these shallow waters.

The first ships, with names such as *SS Wave*, *Taliesin* and *Iron Duke* (named in honour of the Duke of Wellington) docked at Knightstone Harbour. By 1860 regular sailings had begun with the paddle steamer *Kilmun* running to Cardiff, a trip that took 40 minutes.



Birnbeck pier with a paddle steamer passing by © Weston Museum

In these early days the comings and goings of ships were limited by the huge tidal range of the Severn Estuary. The opening of Birnbeck Pier in 1867 meant ships could dock more often in the deeper waters around the island. On 19 June that year the *Heather Belle* was Birnbeck's first visitor.



A ticket for a P&A Campbell steamer © Weston Museum

In 1887 local businessmen contacted the P & A Campbell Company of Scotland asking them to move south and work routes in the Bristol Channel. The company had been running excursion boats on the Clyde since 1854 but they were struggling and happily relocated in 1888.



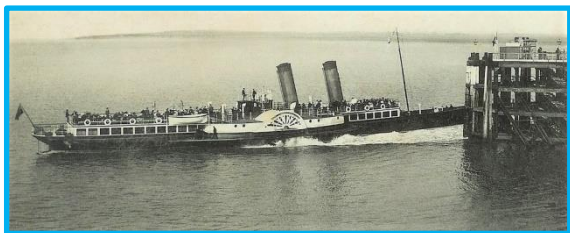
A brooch from the Campbell steamer Britannia © Weston Museum

Spring 1888 saw the paddle steamer *Waverley* begin sailing the Bristol Channel. The *Bonnie Doon* and *Lady Margaret*, ships of the Edwards & Robertson Company of Cardiff, were also working this route.

A fierce rivalry soon built up between Bristol-based P & A Campbell and the Welsh company. Adverts and schedules were torn down and the competing ships would even race each other to reach paying passengers.

In 1893 the competition came to a head when the Campbell ship *Ravenswood* and the Edwards & Robertson ship *Lorna Doone* raced each other from Lynmouth in Devon to Birnbeck Pier. As the ships approached the berth, the *Lorna Doone* was slightly ahead. The *Ravenswood*'s Captain refused to give way and they collided, sending passengers sliding over the decks. After this incident a Harbour Master was appointed to control the docking of ships.

Despite losing this race Campbell soon saw off the threat from the Welsh company. Edwards & Robertson went out of business in 1895 and Campbell bought many of their ships.



The Westonia (later Tintern) at the Birnbeck jetty © Weston Museum

The early 1900s was the heyday of steamer traffic in Weston, with as many as 15,000 people a day disembarking at Birnbeck. To cope with the growing number of passengers, a low water jetty was built. It finally opened in 1909 after construction was disrupted by the great gale of 1903.

The pier itself was so full of attractions and rides that it was quite common for visitors to spend the whole day there. To draw people into the town the Grand Pier was built, opening in 1904. An extension to the pier was added in 1907 to allow ships to dock there. After 1908, however, steamer companies stopped using it, considering the tidal range and currents in Weston Bay too dangerous.

By now, Campbell was dominant in the Bristol Channel paddle steamer trade. They established a monopoly in 1910 when their last major competitor, the Red Funnel Line, folded and their ships were sold to Campbell. The company would reign supreme in the channel until war broke out in 1914.

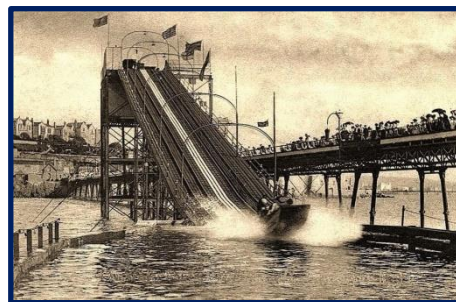
During the First World War the whole Campbell fleet was taken to be used by the Royal Navy. One of the ships saw action evacuating troops from the beaches of Gallipoli. After the war only nine ships were returned to the company; two had been lost to enemy action and three were unfit for further service.

As peace returned the company initially struggled to get back to normal. Competition briefly resumed with the arrival of the Welsh 'Yellow Funnel Fleet' in 1919. However, Campbell had seen off their new rival by 1921. Never again would another steamer company seriously challenge them, but new threats to the business were emerging.

Travelling by car and coach was becoming more common, and by the late 1930s Campbell was feeling the effects of the competition. In response, prices were cut to attract customers and special events were laid on. New boats were also planned, but this was interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War. Campbell once again found their fleet pressed into service with the Royal Navy.

By the war's end, five of Campbell's ships had been lost, including the Brighton Queen during the evacuation at Dunkirk in 1940. Two more had been scrapped.

The remaining paddle steamers returned to the channel in 1946, and new, larger, boats were even built to replace those lost. However, passenger numbers soon fell and a year of particularly bad weather saw Campbell lose over £70,000 in 1956.



The Water Chute ride on Birnbeck Pier © Weston Museum

The Company took steps to cut costs: they moved from Bristol to Cardiff and several ships were scrapped. It was not enough though, and Campbell went into receivership in 1959.

The company was taken over by George Knott Industries. The new owners announced that excursions would continue, but on a smaller scale. In a bid to cut costs, more modern ships (such as the *MV Balmora*) without paddlewheels were introduced. By 1967 the last of the paddle steamers, the *Bristol Queen*, had made its final voyage.

Campbell continued to run ships in the upper Bristol Channel, but only until 1971.

