

Douglas Lapraik & Douglas Steamship Co. Ltd

A SHORT HISTORY

(see also separate Fleet List)

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Introduction

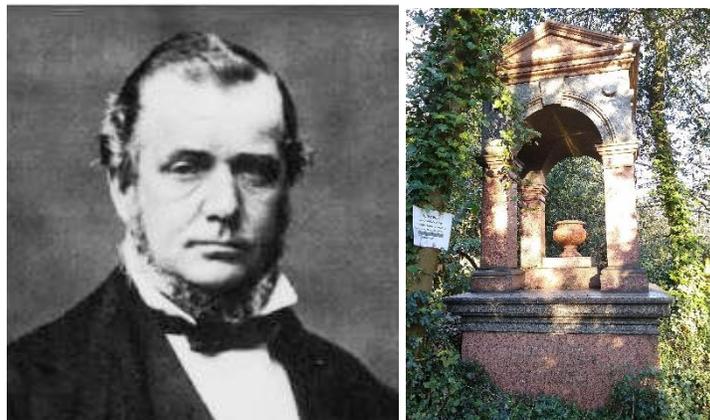
The Douglas S.S. Co. (DSSC) was the smallest of the three British shipping companies which maintained regular services on the China Coast in the Treaty Port era but also, in terms of continuity of service, the oldest. Its steamship line between Hong Kong and the treaty ports of Swatow, Amoy and Foochow was opened in 1860, the year in which the Treaty of Peking formally ended the Second Opium War and opened these ports to foreign trade. Apart from the interruption of the Second World War, the line was maintained until the Communist Revolution of 1949. The company itself lasted until 1976 as a minor trampship operator within the Williamson/Mullion group.

Perhaps the most curious aspect of the company's long history is that its phase of expansion came to an end as early as 1880. Thereafter the company was rapidly surpassed in size by the rival Indo-China S.N. Co. (ICSNC) and China Navigation Co. (CNC) and was gradually forced to yield ground. By the mid-1900s it was left with just the original line, maintained with the same number of ships (albeit larger) as forty years previously. The explanation must recognize that Douglas Lapraik & Co., as a local Hong Kong shipping firm, was always constrained by limited capital resources. ICSNC, by contrast, was backed by the huge merchant empire of Jardine, Matheson & Co., while CNC, through John Swire & Sons, was able to draw upon the London capital market. Moreover, from the early 1880s Lapraiks were restricted by an agreement with ICSNC and CNC that they would not send their ships north of Foochow if the other two firms did not challenge their monopoly of the trade between Hong Kong and the treaty ports but confined their involvement to carrying the Shanghai trade. In fact, by the twentieth century Jardine, Matheson & Co. acted as agents for the Douglas S.S. Co. in Swatow and Foochow. Yet the agreement could no doubt have been renegotiated had Lapraiks forced the issue. The reason for its extraordinary stability must be that Lapraiks, quite apart from lacking the financial resources to attack their rivals' trades, were well satisfied with the comfortable monopoly of a very lucrative trade. In Hong Kong and the treaty ports they became as much a social institution as a commercial firm. Relationships with the Chinese were always good: Chinese merchants liked the company because, in their more easy-going

way, Lapraiks would 'talk', something incompatible with the efficient foreign business practices of China Navigation Co. Through success, however, Lapraiks became more complacent and more conservative, until eventually events ran beyond their control. Even without the Revolution of 1949, the company's survival on the China Coast would have been in jeopardy.

Beginnings

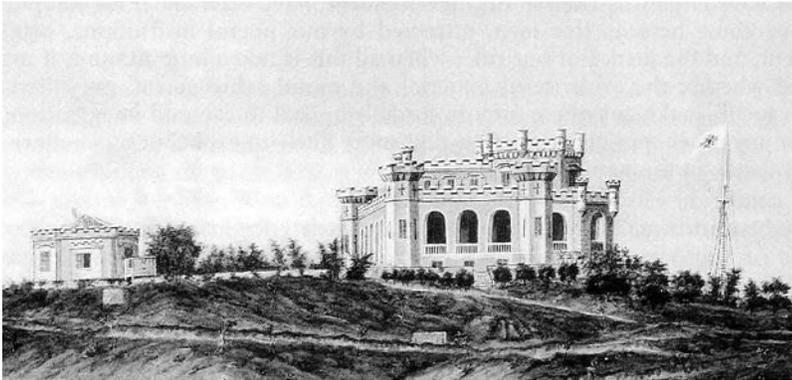
Founder of the company was one Douglas Lapraik, who arrived in the newly established colony of Hong Kong about 1840 at the age of twenty- two and apprenticed himself to a local jeweller and watchmaker who specialised in chronometers. In 1845 he set up business under his own name. By the end of 1846 he had accumulated sufficient capital to go into partnership with several other English businessmen to purchase the 800-ton Chinese junk *Keying* in Canton and despatch her for New York, Boston and London, where she arrived in March 1848 and created great interest. His first venture into steam seems to have been *Hellespont* (445/49), which he bought at auction at Hong Kong on 11 August 1856 for \$34,500 but promptly resold to Jardine, Matheson & Co., who despatched her for Shanghai on the 25th of the month. She would appear to have been no more than a speculation.



Douglas Lapraik and his grave in Highgate cemetery
(<https://industrialhistoryhk.org/douglas-lapraik/>; Simon Edwards Esq).

Meanwhile, Lapraik had acquired a block of waterfront land on Queen's Road and laid out a small shipyard. After this had been sold off for development, subsequently passing into the hands of Lane, Crawford & Co., Lapraik became involved with Whampoa shipbuilder J.C. Couper. In February 1857 he appeared in the Hong Kong press, evidently as agent for Couper, advertising the screw steamer *Mirage* as available for towage. In the same year and in partnership with Couper he opened the Colony's first drydock, the Hope Dock, at Aberdeen. When in 1863 this Hong Kong Dock Company merged with other ship-repairing interests to form the Hong Kong & Whampoa Dock Co., Lapraik became its first Secretary and on its incorporation in the following year he also became a Director. In 1865 he also played a leading role in the amalgamation of several ferry boat operators into the Hong Kong, Canton & Macao Steamboat Co. Ltd, of which he also became a Director. Among other Hong Kong firms, he also held shares in the Hong Kong & Shanghai Banking Corporation and in 1866, the year he left the colony, was involved in the formation of the Hong Kong Hotel Co. Aside from business, Lapraik's monument in the colony was undoubtedly the 'Gothic mansion' Douglas Castle at Pokfulam, where he had lived with his

Chinese concubine. His departure from the colony may well have been due to ill-health, because he died in London in 1869 at the age of just fifty-two.



L: Early lithograph of Douglas Castle with Lapraik houseflag flying from the signal mast (Nigel Cameron (1991) *An Illustrated History of Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press. p. 180.).

R: The Castle incorporated into University Hall, University of Hong Kong (Tkstevan: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Douglas_Lapraik#/media/File:University_Hall_\(University_of_Hong_Kong\)_exterior.JPG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Douglas_Lapraik#/media/File:University_Hall_(University_of_Hong_Kong)_exterior.JPG)).

Although there is some evidence that Lapraik may have owned and/or managed several local sailing vessels, the history of the shipping company bearing his name may be taken as beginning on 20 April 1859, when he despatched for Swatow the 196-ton wooden paddle steamer *Undine*. When launched in Hong Kong on 4 January 1859 she had been stated to be intended as a river steamer and tug for use at Bangkok, but Lapraik evidently purchased her and perhaps made some modifications before completion. She soon turned out to be unsuitable, was withdrawn for re-engining, and sold without re-entering the coastal trade. Nonetheless convinced of the potential of the trade, Lapraik ordered from Thomas Wingate of Whiteinch the screw steamer *Fanqui* (1860), powered by a three-cylinder direct-acting engine capable of ten knots. Leaving Glasgow on 3 March 1860, she proceeded under sail as far as Java Head, from where she steamed on to Singapore and Hong Kong, which was reached on 10 June. After refitting she then opened the first regular steamship line from Hong Kong to Swatow, Amoy and Foochow, a route which the company was to serve for the next ninety years. In August 1861 the *Fanqui* was joined by the *Swatow*, and the larger *Undine* and *Chanticleer* (1862) soon followed from the same builders. Although the *Swatow* was soon sold off as too small, by 1863, at a time when steam navigation on the China coast was still in its infancy, Lapraik was therefore operating three modern screw steamers.¹ This result was not achieved solely through Lapraik's own efforts. As was typical in those days under the 64-shares system, investment in the ships was spread among local businessmen, and the registered owners of most of them was not Lapraik himself but Timothy Ash Lane of Lane, Crawford & Co. The ships were nevertheless all part of the same venture.

The prospects for the new venture were bright. After the end of the Taiping rebellion in 1864, China settled down to a period of relative peace and trade began rapidly to expand. Because of their high

¹ British consular reports for 1862 refer from about April to a steamer *Douglas* (291 tons) in regular service from Amoy, inter alia carrying sugar from Taiwan to coast ports. The name suggests a Douglas Lapraik vessel but no other details can be found.

operating costs, the pioneer steamers had carried mostly light and valuable cargo (especially opium), mails and European passengers, while most bulky cargo and Chinese passengers continued to be carried by sailing vessel and junk. As steamers became more economical, however, they steadily increased their share of the trade. The arrival of Alfred Holt & Company's compound-engined *Agamemnon* at Hong Kong in 1866 marked the opening of a direct steamship line between Europe and the Far East, while the opening of the Suez Canal at the end of 1869 also indirectly stimulated trade on the China Coast. Despite the loss of the *Chanticleer*, which disappeared with all hands in a typhoon in July 1865, the mid-1860s therefore marked the beginning of a period of rapid expansion. It may be noted that the inroads of steamers to the deepsea trade did, however, lead to the loss of one incidental line of business, namely the towage of the once numerous tea clippers in the treacherous Min River at Foochow.

The next phase was to be directed not by Douglas Lapraik, however, but by his nephew. An advertisement in the Hong Kong Daily Press on 4 April 1866 announced Douglas Lapraik's retirement as of 1 January 1865 from his watchmaking and jewellery business in favour of a Mr George Falconer - the reason for the retrospectivity is not clear. Exactly three months later another advertisement announced that:

I have this day retired from the business heretofore carried on by me in favour of my Nephew, Mr. John Stewart Lapraik.

This was followed on the same day by an advertisement signed by J.S. Lapraik announcing that he had admitted as partner a Mr Alexander McGlashan Heaton and would hence conduct the business under the style and firm' of Douglas Lapraik & Co. It may be noted here that in November 1874 Alfred Thomas Manger, who was associated with Jardine, Matheson & Co., was admitted as a third director.

The new partners started actively to modernise the fleet and extend its sphere of operations. The steamer *Douglas* (1866), which replaced the ill-fated *Chanticleer*, had arrived in Hong Kong in the week before Douglas Lapraik's retirement. Late in 1866 the company acquired secondhand from Dent & Co. the even larger paddle steamer *Yesso* - whose Chinese name was quickly amended when it was discovered that she was sailing as the 'Jesus'. The now obsolete *Fei Loong* (ex *Fanqui*) was sold and the *Undine* advertised for disposal, although she was not sold until the arrival in September 1868 of the *Kwang Tung*, sister of the *Douglas* (1866). Then in 1872 came the 1,375-ton *Namoa*, which was placed in service to Saigon and Singapore, as was her sister *Douglas* (1873).

The company's major diversification was to Taiwan, which until the 1860s had been a very backward part of the Chinese empire. The Treaty of Peking (1860) had led to the opening for foreign trade of the ports of Taiwanfu, Tamsui, Keelung and, in 1864, Takao. Lapraiks tried in mid-1867 to open a line between the island and the mainland with the specially built *Taiwan* (1866), but the initiative was premature and the ship was sold after only six months. In the late 1860s the development of the tea industry led to a more viable level of trade. In November 1871 Lapraiks therefore made a second and successful attempt with another specially designed steamer, the *Hailoong* (1871). The new line was from Hong Kong to Swatow and Amoy (still the transshipment port on the mainland for much of the Taiwan trade) and thence to Takao and Tamsui, which were the ports of shipment for the tea trade. The *Hailoong* was subsequently joined by the *Taiwan* (ex *Leonor*), whose loss in February 1879 led to the

ordering of the larger *Fokien* (1880). In 1881 the company also acquired the *Thales*, which had been completed but not used as a blockade runner for the American Civil War, and opened a southern line to the roadstead port of Anping.

Less successful was the attempt in 1871 to open a Hong Kong/Manila Line with the ex-P&O *Azof* (700/55) and the chartered *Sunshine* (281/66). Both ships were soon wrecked, the former at Amoy in November 1871 and the latter in mid-August 1872 on voyage Hong Kong to Swatow. Although the *Azof* was replaced by the chartered *Thales*, after loss of the *Sunshine* the Manila line seems to have been suspended.

Douglas S.S. Co. Ltd

Following the rationalisation of the shipping interests of both Jardines and Swires, on 28 July 1883 the Douglas Steamship Co. Ltd was incorporated to take over the various steamers and other assets which had been managed but only partly owned by Douglas Lapraik & Co. The fleet of the new company consisted of seven ships: *Douglas* (\$217,000), *Namoa* (\$150,000), *Kwangtung* (\$140,000), *Fokien* (\$125,000), *Thales* (\$100,000), *Albay* (\$60,000) and *Hailoong* (\$60,000). Together with buoys and moorings at Hong Kong, Swatow, Amoy and Tamsui, a launch and cargo boats at Tamsui and a steam launch and wooden wharf at Hong Kong, the total book value came to about \$900,000. This translated into a nominal capital of \$1 million in 20,000 shares of 50 cents each, of which all but 1144 were allocated. A four-member Consulting Committee was constituted of P. Ryrie as chairman (he was also chairman of the Hong Kong, Canton & Macao S.B. Co.), F.D. Sassoon, B. Layton and W.S. Young, but control remained in the hands of Douglas Lapraik & Co. as general managers.

For the first decade or so the company's financial results must have delighted the shareholders. Admittedly the first year was marred by the loss after only six months' operations of the *Albay*. Although she had been fully insured and the insurance was duly paid, pending the ordering of a replacement the funds had been deposited in the Oriental Bank, which then failed! Fortunately the company was able by 1888 to recover from the liquidators all but about one per cent. Only a year later the *Kwangtung* was lost in the Min River at Foochow. To replace her, the company's first steel-hulled steamer, the *Haiphong*, was purchased on the stocks from Wigham, Richardson & Co., who were also given a contract for the triple-expansion steamer *Formosa* (1885), the delayed replacement for the *Albay* for the Taiwan trade. As if this was not enough misfortune, in February 1886 the new Douglas (1881) was lost near Swatow. The company had carried part of the risk in its own fund but as a replacement was able to order a larger triple expansion steamer which became the *Haitan* (1887). Nevertheless, even including the relatively poor dividend of 3% in 1883/84, over the first ten years of operations the average dividend was 8%, never again falling below 4.5% and in 1884/85 as high as 12%. Nor was maintenance of such a dividend rate at the expense of adequate provision for reserves and depreciation. In most years 8% of the book value of assets was set aside for investment by the general managers, and in poorer years not less than the rate of dividend. Thus, in 1887 the company was well able to sell the original *Hailoong* (1871), which was now too small, and order a new and much larger *Hailoong* (1888) to run alongside the *Fokien* and *Formosa* in the Taiwan trade - the *Haimun* (1896) which later replaced the *Fokien* was a near sister. Finally, in 1890/91 a sum of \$47,000 was invested in refitting the old *Thales*, which was regarded as 'strong, reliable and well suited to the Taiwanfoo trade'.

The end of the first very successful decade was marred, however, by the death in 1893 of J.S. Lapraik. Control of Douglas Lapraik & Co. then passed to his junior partner Davis, who in turn took in J.H. Lewis. By the late 1890s control had passed to Lewis, who about 1900 took in H.P. ('Shiny') White. The latter, who on the death of Lewis in 1912 took in G.W. Barton, then became the driving force behind the company until his death about 1929. The rapid turnover of partners was matched in the Consulting Committee. The death of Ryrie in September 1892 had meant that only D.R. Sassoon remained of the original four members. This was less surprising, since members included the current Hong Kong taipans who were not permanent residents, and mattered less, because the powers of the Committee were limited - it is likely that the Committee's main function was to maintain peaceful and profitable 'coexistence' with other British shipping interests (notably Jardine, Matheson & Co.). The instability and probable inexperience among the partners, however, may well have weakened their ability to cope with the problems of the late 1890s and early 1900s. Fortunately the firm's compradore, Chun Tong (born in Hawaii and with an American college education), who had taken on the position in 1889, remained in that capacity until at least the late-1910s.

The cession of Taiwan to Japan under the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895), which ended the Sino-Japanese War, struck the company a heavy blow. Although at first it was business as usual, in April 1899 Osaka Shosen Kaisha (OSK) placed two steamers on the Amoy/Tamsui line under subsidy from the Japanese government. DSSC immediately cut the rates but its officially sponsored rival was neither deterred nor brought to terms. On the contrary, in April 1900 OSK opened another line to Taiwanfoo and then began to compete on the China Coast with a fort-nightly service between Hong Kong and Foochow. Having forgone payment of a dividend in 1898/99, in the following year DSSC incurred a heavy loss and was forced to withdraw two of its steamers from the Taiwan trade. Fortunately, in 1900/01 satisfactory earnings were able to be made despite the 'low and unremunerative level of rates' because the Boxer rebellion led to the chartering of several ships to the British Government, while in 1902 *Haimun* and *Formosa* were able to be chartered to the American Government. Eventually, however, the company had to admit that the Taiwan trade was a lost cause. OSK had ignored repeated offers to come to an arrangement and was clearly intent, with government backing, on gaining control of the entire transshipment trade. Moreover, preferential tariffs had been introduced to encourage direct trade with Japan, while the opening of Keelung as a deepsea port in 1902 facilitated direct export to the rest of the world. In any case, the company's shareholders were not surprisingly becoming restive at the persistence of low earnings. Thus in 1903 the *Formosa* was sold and a year later, at high prices resulting from the Russo-Japanese War, *Hailoong* and old iron-hulled *Thales*. (Appropriately renamed *Veteran*, the latter was seized by the Japanese while trying to run the blockade of Port Arthur - she had in fact been built as a blockade runner forty years earlier - and lasted another forty-one years under the Japanese flag, a quite remarkable career.) All three steamers had for some time proven too small and too expensive to run and temporarily were replaced by a chartered steamer.

Having been squeezed out of the Taiwan trade, the company was slow to consolidate its position on the China coast. Of its three remaining ships, only *Haiching* (1898), which had arrived on the Coast in March 1899, was well suited to the current requirements of the trade. A three-island design much larger than any previous vessel she had been ordered to replace *Namoa*, whose wreck in October 1897 was to be the last of the company's many marine casualties. By contrast, *Haimun* was of only half her

capacity but cost just as much to run. Yet in 1905 the company had balked at ordering a new steamer, with the result that *Haimun* was soon shutting out cargo. Not until 1907 did the company belatedly order the new steamer, which arrived on the coast at the end of October 1908, just in time for a drastic recession in trade. *Haiyang* was a near sister to *Haiching* but somewhat slower and with another 350 tons capacity; she was also distinguishable by her more solid, straight-up-and-down appearance. *Haimun* then became a reserve vessel pending a satisfactory sale.

With this fleet the company was able to maintain two services. One was twice-weekly, leaving Hong Kong on Tuesdays and Fridays for Foochow (forty-eight hours turnaround) and calling both ways for ten hours at Swatow and Amoy, making in all a nine-day roundtrip. The other was a twice-weekly shuttle service to Swatow only, leaving Hong Kong on Wednesdays and Sundays. This schedule was to remain virtually unchanged until the late 1930s. It was carefully worked out so that steaming was done at night and cargo could be worked during the day. The cargo was mostly general, with tea from Foochow in the season. Each ship carried cabin passengers, as well as holding Hong Kong licences for about nine hundred deck passengers, mostly Chinese labourers from Amoy and Swatow.

Not until late 1915 did the company invest in a more suitable running mate for *Haiching* and *Haiyang*. Purchased from the Union S.S. Co. of New Zealand, *Moura* had been built for and extravagantly fitted out in 1899 by the North Mount Lyell Copper Co. to break the Union S.S. Company's monopoly of the copper trade between the dangerous West Coast of Tasmania and Melbourne. The latter pre-empted the competition by buying the ship while on her delivery voyage, but found her too large for her designed trade and uneconomic for any other, in consequence of which she spent a good deal of time laid up. Having been designed to carry concentrates on a draft shallow enough to cross the bar at Hell's Gates (Macquarie Harbour), she had a very small cargo capacity for her size but also a high coal consumption. Nevertheless, when rebuilt as *Hai Hong* with 'tweendeck spaces for several hundred deck passengers she more than paid her way. Her entry to service in January 1916 enabled the *Haimun* to be sold - she lasted another twenty-nine years until being lost at the end of World War II - while *Haiyang* and *Haiching* were able to be chartered out at high wartime rates. For the year ending 30 June 1916 the company made almost twice its previous record profit (in 1895) and was able to pay 28% in dividends and bonuses.

From late-1916 the company's operations were considerably disrupted by the requisitioning of ships at rates well below the market. *Haiching* and *Haiyang* were taken up for Imperial Service and the *Haitan* and *Hai Hong* by the Hong Kong Government. Despite the lower rates of hire, the company was nevertheless able to maintain high dividends: 20% in 1916/17, 22% in 1917/18 and 18% in 1918/19. First ship to be released was the *Hai Hong* after a fire in October 1918; she was followed by *Haiyang* just before Christmas and *Haiching* and *Haitan* early in 1919.

The shipping boom continued after the War and in 1919/20 the company was again able to pay out 20 per cent. To take advantage of high charter rates for *Haiyang* and *Haiching* only three ships were used in the Coast trade, including the chartered American-flag *Quinnebaug* (ex *Pong Tong* - 1723/03) from mid-1919 to March 1921. Meanwhile the elderly *Haitan* (1888) was sold in November 1919. To replace her, early in 1920 the company took the risk of paying a high price for the *Hai Loong*, built in 1912 as *Morialta* for the South Australian Gulf trade. She was not much larger than the *Haitan* but had much

more cabin accommodation. Unfortunately, this configuration and her high coal consumption made her uneconomic. In response to a good offer she was sold back to the Australian coast in mid-1922 and replaced by *Hai Foong* (ex *Tungus*), a ship of much greater cargo capacity and which, after the fitting of additional passenger accommodation, was much better-suited to the requirements of the Coast trade or charter.

Encouraged by a revival in earnings, in March 1923 the company went on to acquire a fifth vessel, the American hospital ship *Repose*. Although older than even *Haiching* (1898), her iron hull was sound and her engines in good condition. Taken in hand by the Hong Kong & Whampoa Dock, her superstructure was rebuilt to accommodate forty first and thirty-two second class cabin passengers and, after being fitted with boilers from the former B.I. turbine steamer *Lama* (1905), she actually did 16.1 knots on trials, which gave her a good reserve of speed to maintain schedules on very modest coal consumption. The company thereby acquired an excellent ship at a bargain price. For the next decade she was the backbone of the Coast trade and gained great popularity among Chinese passengers, who were known to wait for her sailings. The introduction of second-class cabins was also well received; over the next year these were fitted in the rest of the fleet.



Douglas Pier bustling in the interwar years, *Hai Ning* berthed as usual stern to Connaught Road and making steam prior to departure (H.T. Wong@Flickr: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/hoting2000/21969335988/>).

Just as the company completed its modernisation program, the China Coast trade came to a sudden and unexpected halt. The May 30th incident in Shanghai led in June 1925 to a nationwide anti-British boycott which focused upon Hong Kong and British shipping. Swatow and Amoy were virtually closed and Foochow could be served only irregularly. *Hai Ning* could handle on her own what little coastal trade remained. Apart from *Hai Foong*, which in March 1926 was sold to the San Peh S.N. Co., the other ships were at first laid up and then chartered to Chinese firms for the deck passenger trade to the Straits. Amoy reopened in April but it was mid-October before sailings could be resumed to Swatow

and the normal schedule restored. In the financial years ending 31 March 1926 and 1927 the company recorded heavy losses, the first since 1899/1900. The following year there was a modest profit but a dividend was again forgone. In an attempt to reduce costs, *Hai Hong* was sold in August 1928 and replaced by the more economical *Haiyang*, which since the War had spent much time chartered out for the Straits trade but latterly had lacked satisfactory employment. Now with only three ships, the company no longer had a vessel in reserve and the Hong Kong-Swatow shuttle service had to remain suspended.

The desirability of having a fourth ship was shown in December 1929 by the savage piracy of *Haiching*. Early on the morning of 8 December she was seized at sea by about thirty pirates who, as usual, had disguised themselves among the deck passengers coming aboard at Swatow. Fortunately, because piracy was so rife on the coast at that time, *Haiching*, like other British ships, had her superstructure shut off from the rest of the ship by iron grilles under armed Sikh guards and all the officers were armed. These pre-cautions prevented the pirates from seizing the bridge. So thwarted, they tried to dislodge the officers by setting fire to below the bridge. Just in the nick of time the ship's distress signals were answered by the arrival on the scene at 0500 of HMS *Shirley*, followed soon afterwards by HMS *Sirdar*. By then most of the pirates had been killed or wounded by the officers and Indian guards, but the ship had to be abandoned because the flames were gaining hold. Several Chinese deck passengers were killed in the panic of launching the boats. The two warships took off the remaining passengers and extinguished the fire. The surviving pirates tried to hide themselves among the deck passengers but two were identified and later sentenced to death by a Hong Kong court. A photograph of the ship taken after she had been assisted back to Hong Kong shows the bridge completely gutted and the surrounding grilles twisted and collapsed onto the heap of charcoal and ash below. Among the people killed was the third officer: the Captain and Chief Engineer were awarded OBEs. The ship was some time out of commission undergoing repairs. It may be noted that this was not the first fatal piracy in the company's history. On 10 December 1890 *Namoa* (1872) had been attacked near Hong Kong, resulting in the death of the master, a European passenger and two Malay quarter masters.

Under these circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that by the late 1920s the company had run into financial difficulties. Matters were not helped by the death about 1929 of 'Shiny' White, who had been junior and then senior partner in Douglas Lapraik & Co. since 1900. His brother 'Tiny' White, who took over from him, lacked the same experience.

The company was saved by S.T. Williamson, who in 1932 bought out the controlling interest in Douglas Lapraik & Co., thereby also gaining control of the Douglas S.S. Co. Since the early 1920s he had acted as the company's Marine Superintendent and together with Ramsay, his Number Two, he had supervised the refitting of *Hai Ning* in 1923/24. Because his own shipowning had been confined to the tramping trades and charter he lacked experience of the China coast trade, but used his understanding of ships and men to pinpoint what was wrong. One reform was the elimination of the practice whereby on leaving port the Mate and the Compradore would work their way through the ship checking passengers' tickets and looking for unmanifested cargo, collecting on the spot in the case of non-payment. Not all the money so collected found its way back to the company and apparently the job of First Mate was so lucrative that offers of promotion to Master were refused.

Williamson used his own *Svale* to relieve the Douglas S.S. Co. ships when necessary and, when she was wrecked in 1934, he bought the veteran *Seistan*, formerly the Adelaide S.S. Co.'s *Innamincka* of 1890. In the mid-1930s she was chartered to the Douglas S.S. Co. for the shuttle service between Hong Kong and Swatow. Since the early-1920s the company had been troubled by competition from *Hydrangea*, a former R.N. sloop of the same name, which a group of Swatow merchants had placed in service in the course of a dispute with the company. She managed to obtain a passenger licence and survived for quite a few years by dint of her speed, rate cutting and other less reputable practices. The upgrading of the service with *Seistan* had the desired effect of forcing her out of the trade.

Meanwhile in September 1934 Williamson had purchased in New York the Furness Withy liner *Silvia*, a ship built in 1909 for the Russian Volunteer Fleet; in 1935 she was sold to Douglas Lapraik and refitted for the China coast trade as *Haitan*. The largest ship owned by the company she was probably too large by the time she was bought, because the recently opened flying boat service was starting to cut into the cabin passenger trade. The popular *Hai Ning* was sold in 1937, because it was not possible to refit her to comply with the new passenger licence regulations, and she was replaced by *Sagres* (2333/04) on charter from Williamson & Co. Already on charter, *Seistan* was at the end of the year transferred to the ownership of Douglas S.S. Co.

The outbreak of open warfare between China and Japan in August 1937 marked the end of all stability and tradition. On 6 September the Japanese Navy imposed a blockade of Chinese shipping at Swatow, and closed the river at Foochow to all shipping. At first the laying up of Chinese-flag shipping gave a boost to the company's business. As trade in North China became more difficult because of the fighting and the blockade, the China Navigation Co., in contravention of the long-standing agreement, began to run its own ships between Hong Kong and the Treaty Ports. Williamson retaliated by sending ships on to Wenchow to tap the Yangtse trade that was now flowing through that port to escape the Japanese blockade. By mid-1939, however, the situation had become almost impossible. On 2 June *Haitan* had been strafed by Japanese aircraft while discharging into Chinese barges at the boom below Foochow and was forced to return with her cargo. Then on 25 July she was damaged by a mine off the coast of Fukien. About the same time *Seistan* was bombed at Amoy. The offices in Amoy and Foochow were therefore closed. Although sailings were maintained to Swatow, after the Japanese capture of the city on 21 June British trade had to be carried on under Royal Navy protection.

After the suspension of the main line, the ships were redeployed as well as possible, until eventually caught up in the outbreak of the Pacific War. *Haitan* was placed on charter in the Saigon trade and then chartered to MacKinnon, MacKenzie Co. for service in the Bay of Bengal. *Haiyang* was placed in the trade between Hong Kong and Kwang Chow Wan (Port Bayard), a French administered port in the far south of China through which Chinese trade was now diverted. After the Vichy Government came to power in France the situation became chaotic: the customs agents were quite at a loss to know what to do and it was easiest to ignore them, the Japanese were blockading the port - although not very effectively - to stop Chinese trade and the British Government in Hong Kong was willing to pay absurd freight rates for strategic cargoes, especially wolfram. When the Japanese came into alliance with the Vichy French this blockade running came to a halt and *Haiyang* was also chartered out to MacKinnon, MacKenzie Co. Meanwhile in late 1940 or early 1941 *Haiching* and *Seistan* were taken over by the Hong Kong Shipping Board for the MOWT and placed in the Rangoon/Hong Kong rice trade under Douglas

Lapraik management. Both vessels were in Hong Kong in the week before Pearl Harbour. *Haiching* managed to get away to Singapore, awkwardly towing a barge at the insistence of the MOWT, and thence to India where she came under B.I. management until torpedoed in October 1943 on a voyage from Calcutta to Karachi. *Seistan*, which sailed a day or two later, had bunkers to take her only as far as Manila, where she was bombed and sunk on about 28 December 1941. All the company's office staff in Hong Kong and Williamson himself were interned when the colony was surrendered to the Japanese on Christmas Day, 1941.

At the end of the Second World War the company was quick to try and regain its old trade. *Haiyang*, which had been running between Madras and Ceylon under B.I. management, was returned early in 1946. With financial assistance from the M.O.T. she was quickly refitted and placed in service between Hong Kong and Swatow. On her first voyage she returned to Hong Kong overloaded with passengers and with cargo piled up on the decks. In mid-1946 she was able to extend sailings to Taiwan, now surrendered by the Japanese back to the Chinese government, thereby reviving a trade which the company had been driven out of some forty years earlier. *Haitan* was returned by the Royal Navy in June 1946 but in deplorable condition. Since her requisitioning in November 1941 she had been used for no more than harbour duties, first at Rangoon, then in the Maldives and at Trincomalee, where her decks had been ravaged by borers. The company accepted a cash settlement from the Ministry of Transport in lieu of her reconditioning. After having become a fixture lying alongside the company's wharf, in mid-May 1948 she was moved across to Kowloon Dock and then in late September put on a buoy in Kowloon Bay.

The *Haiyang* carried on alone until mid-1949, when her certificates expired and Lloyds refused to grant another extension. With the future of the trade so much in doubt it was hardly worthwhile spending a large sum to refit a 41-year old ship, so she joined *Haitan* in layup. At the end of 1950, when scrap prices had begun to be forced up by the Korean War, *Haitan* was sold to local breakers. The *Haiyang* followed a few months later. She had cost £40,000 and realised as much for scrap; in the process of demolition a cofferdam with a manhole access was found in the double bottom which the crew had used for smuggling contraband. To replace *Haiyang*, Williamson took over from Mollers Ltd the management of the much smaller 'B-type coaster *Empire Park* (1350/46), of just a 1200-dwt capacity. Although retaining her registered name, she was advertised in the Hong Kong Chinese-language press as *Haimun*. On 17 October 1949 Communist forces occupied Swatow, but the company persevered with the trade despite the Nationalist blockade. Her sale at the end of 1951, however, marked the end of the company's China Coast trade.

The Final Phase

The Douglas S.S. Co. nevertheless survived as a corporate entity with considerable reserves. As it happened, the end of the China Coast trade coincided with the death early in September 1950 of Williamson, who had rescued the company in the early 1930s. Responsibility then devolved upon James Robertson (Jim) Mullion as the managing trustee for the Williamson estate. Besides his personal shareholding of 1,010 shares, Williamson had secured ownership of DSSC through Stuarts Investments Limited, which held another 16,511 of the 20,000 issued shares. Control was secured most directly, however, through the general managers Douglas, Lapraik & Company. Paragraph 88 in the articles of

DSSC specified that as long as the owner(s) of Douglas, Lapraik & Co. held one thousand or more shares in DSSC, 'the partner or person in charge of Douglas, Lapraik & Company in Hong Kong or his or her successors shall be Chairman of the Company unless he or she cease to be willing'. J.R. Mullion therefore automatically became Chairman of DSSC.

Although in some respects it might have been logical at this stage to liquidate the company, this course of action was complicated by the responsibility of the trustees to the surviving heir, as well as by the rights of a small but diverse outside shareholding - including inter alia the Roman Catholic Bishop in Hong Kong (626 shares) and the Mother Superior of the Conossian Institute (8 shares). The company's liquid capital realised from the sale of its last two ships was therefore invested, until in the mid-1950s Mullion decided that the time was opportune to reinvest in shipping. DSSC then acquired three 10,000-dwt 'Empire' standards (*Inchearn*, *Inchdouglas* and *Inchmull*), to which was added in 1959 the similar *Inchstuart* transferred from the Williamson fleet. In all matters of management, however, the ships were operated as an integral part of the Williamson fleet. As a legally distinct entity, DSSC survived the realisation of the Williamson & Co. in 1966, although Mullion & Company Ltd now formally took over as managers. Despite the sale of the *Inchearn* for scrap in mid-1966, the remaining three ships continued in service until 1969/70. Then, much as in the mid-1950s when the Williamson fleet had been renewed, DSSC acquired replacement tonnage as a by-product of renewal of the Mullion fleet, namely one freighter (*Inchona*) and two tankers (*Terza* and *Quarta*).

When the Mullion group decided in the mid-1970s to sell off its ships, there was no longer any rationale for the continuing existence of DSSC. Presumably because of the difficulties posed by the various minor shareholders, in line with a shareholders' resolution the Hong Kong Supreme Court was petitioned for an order of compulsory winding up - this was granted in July 1976. At that time Mullion Holdings Ltd (Liberia), which had taken over Stuart's Investments Ltd, was the dominant shareholder with 17,683 shares; Douglas, Lapraik & Co. held 1,010 (Williamson's former personal shareholding), and the only other significant shareholder was the Banque Belge pour l'Etranger (nominees) Ltd, Hong Kong for the Bishop with 774 shares, accounting in all for 19,467 out of 20,000. Following the sale of the *Inchona* in 1975, the last two ships were the tankers *Terza* and *Quarta* - these had evidently been sold about June before the final shareholders meeting.

Sources

The history of this elusive company could not have been written without the generous assistance of Professor E.K. Haviland (whose wrote extensively on early steam navigation in China) and Mr R. Murray, during the 1930s the company's manager in Amoy and after the War in Hong Kong. The late T.M. Milne, author of 'Steam Vessels sold to Japan up to 1870' (1964) was also a generous correspondent. Additional information on the founder, Douglas Lapraik, was obtained from C.N. Crisswell, *The Taipans: Hong Kong's Merchant Princes* (OUP, 1981). Annual reports of the Douglas S.S. Co. from 1883/84 to 1927/28 were obtained from the Jardine, Matheson & Co. archive at Cambridge University and from the *Hong Kong Weekly Press*. A full account of the long career of *Moura/Hai Hong/Mactan* by I. Farquhar and H. Dick can be found in 'The Log', quarterly journal of the Nautical Association of Australia Inc. (February 1985).