

J. & W. GOFFEY

**Shipowners
28 Chapel Street
Liverpool**



A three-masted barque in the River Mersey. This vessel, the *Cuauhtemoc* was photographed leaving Liverpool for the 2008 Tall Ships Race. It is a modern Mexican navy sail-training ship and is similar in size and appearance to the later nineteenth century vessels of J & W Goffey.

Chapter 2.20. J. and W. Goffey, Shipowners, 28 Chapel Street, Liverpool.

James and William Goffey started their shipowning business in about 1877. We do not know how or why they started in a high-risk capital-intensive business such as shipowning, but in its nineteenth century heyday Liverpool was full of opportunities for the entrepreneur to service the new industries of the Industrial Revolution. By law, ownership of a vessel had to be divided into 64 shares, although this did not mean 64 owners as an owner could hold any number of shares. Most likely they started in a small way holding a very small share in a vessel, with others, and using their dividends – frequently paid out on a per trip basis – to acquire further shares or shares in other vessels. Cargo rates fluctuated enormously due to the normal economic ebb and flow of trade but in times of crisis, for example during wars when there was a heightened risk to merchant shipping, rates would go through the roof and it was not unknown for vessels to pay for themselves on one trip. So possibly James and William persuaded their bank manager to lend them some money, recruited further backers to buy in to the venture and then went to Glasgow and ordered their first ship.

In 1851 James had been a baker's apprentice, in 1861 a clerk, by 1881 a shipowner and around the turn of the century Chairman of the Liverpool Shipowners' Association. He was the representative of the Shipowners' Association in the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce for 14 years, as well as a director of the Mersey Mutual Underwriting Association, the Central Marine Insurance Association and other bodies associated with maritime insurance, shipbroking, etc. In 1881 William still gave his occupation in the national census as an innkeeper, so it appears he was the junior partner in the enterprise. This much was acknowledged by his son, William Jnr., in documents held by the Merseyside Maritime Museum. Although by 1877 their father, Capt. James Goffey, had been dead for more than twenty years, having had a master mariner for a father probably stood the two brothers in good stead when establishing themselves in the shipping trade, providing not only contacts but also what must have been a well-known name in shipping circles - even if the manner of their father's passing would have raised eyebrows in polite Liverpool society. Additionally, their younger brother Arthur was by this time making his way in his career, being by 1881 operations manager of the Warren Shipping Company – admittedly a steamship company, but nevertheless probably a useful contact in shipping circles. The second half of the nineteenth century was a time of great economic expansion, particularly in the Liverpool shipping trade. The new factories of the industrial revolution in the north of England imported their raw materials and exported their products through Liverpool and it quickly usurped Bristol as the principal port on the west coast. Since it was the principal port for shipping westwards, the rapid industrial development of the United States added to the growth of Liverpool, indeed in the same documents lodged in the Merseyside Maritime Museum, William Goffey Jnr. admits that the American Civil War (1861-65) caused many problems for American shipowners and Liverpool shipowners in general did "*very nicely*" out of it.

So while we can piece together little about how the enterprise started, there are many records of the ships themselves because of the need for registration of merchant vessels, a practice which came about in order to provide information for the government during the Napoleonic wars. The ships themselves were all British-registered and can be found in the Lloyds Register of Shipping and the following list derives from that source. All the J. and W. Goffey ships were bought new from Russell and Co., a shipyard at Port Glasgow on the Clyde which started building iron sailing ships in about 1870; they were, in chronological order:-

The *Dumfriesshire*. Iron barque of 1155 tons built in 1877. She was sold in 1907 to Norwegian owners and re-registered in Norway as the *Alfhelm*, being sold again and registered in Copenhagen as the *Maagen*, before being finally broken up in 1923.

The *Melanesia*. Iron barque of 1155 tons built in 1878. This ship went missing on 16 May 1888 while carrying coal from the Tyne to Valparaiso. The *Melanesia* was in the Albert Dock, Liverpool, on 3rd April 1881 and is recorded in the census of that day as a 1224 ton barque registered in Liverpool as a foreign-going vessel. At the time she was employed on the Australia run under her Master, Captain J. H. Kirkbride. It is likely that this would have meant shipping grain from South Australia to Northern Europe; the traditional route for sailing ships to take advantage of the winds in the southern hemisphere was west to east across the southern ocean, rounding Cape Horn into the south Atlantic in an eastwards direction, a dangerous and exceedingly arduous way of making a living for Victorian mariners.

The *Micronesia*. Iron barque of 1619 tons built in 1883. This ship caught fire and burnt out off East Goodwin on 1st August 1897 on a voyage from Iquique, Chile, to Europe and was broken up the following year. Iquique was one of the “nitrate ports” in Chile from where saltpetre (potassium nitrate) was exported for use in the manufacture of gunpowder. A fire on board a ship with a cargo of saltpetre was not something that could be extinguished easily.

The *Eurasia*. Three-masted iron barque of 1874 tons built in 1885. She was sold to an Italian owner in Genoa in 1908 and was attacked and sunk by a German U-boat near Genoa on 14th August 1916. Sinking by U-boat attack was a fate which befell many old sailing ships during the First World War.

The *Malaysia*. Three-masted iron barque of 1827 tons built in 1885. This ship had a very short life, having gone missing in August 1890 on a voyage from San Francisco to Queenstown (Cobh), Ireland. The Panama Canal had not been constructed in 1890, so the *Malaysia*’s route from San Francisco would almost certainly have been through the dangerous waters around Cape Horn.



The *Eurasia*. Sunk by a German U-boat during the First World War.
 (Photo: Brodie Collection, LaTrobe Picture Collection,
 State Library of Victoria, Melbourne)

The *Oranasia*. Steel four-masted barque of 2700 tons built in 1892. This ship was sold in 1907 to A.G Alster of Hamburg and renamed the *Alsterfee*. Subsequently being owned by E.C. Schramm and Co. of Bremen as the *Tamara VI* and then Gebr.Vinnen of Hamburg who renamed her the *Lucy Vinnen* in 1912. After the First World War she was sold to Hackfeld-Fischer of Hamburg but in 1921 was assigned to the Greek Government as war reparations and renamed the *Mayotte*. She was sold the following year to B. Schulisch of Danzig (Gdansk) and sold again the following year to Wilhelm Hemsoth of Hamburg. Two years later, in 1925, she finally returned to England as the *Hedwig Hemsoth* to be broken up for scrap.



The *Oranisia*. Sold in 1907, Oranisia had several owners before returning to England to be scrapped in 1925.

(Photo: Brodie Collection, LaTrobe Picture Collection
State Library of Victoria, Melbourne)

The *Austrasia*. Steel four-masted barque of 2700 tons built in 1892. The sister ship to the *Oranisia*, the *Austrasia* had a more distinguished career, ending up in the world's largest fleet of windjammers and taking part in the Grain Races from Australia. The *Austrasia*, under her Master, Captain Parker, set sail on her maiden voyage one Friday in May 1892. Fridays were considered by superstitious Victorian mariners to be unlucky days to set off on a voyage and James Goffey offered to postpone departure for a day, but Capt. Parker obviously did not believe such tales. Sadly the vessel was dismasted in a storm as soon as she reached the South Atlantic and had to limp back to Rio do Janeiro using a temporary rig. The damage was too severe to repair in Rio and Capt. Parker had to return under the temporary rig all the way to Liverpool, arriving on December 18th 1892, just in time for Christmas. After such a disastrous

start it is perhaps surprising that Capt. Parker kept his job; possibly James Goffey did not believe in mariners' superstitions any more than Capt. Parker did.



The *Austrasia*. The last survivor of the J & W Goffey fleet, shown in this postcard flying the J & W Goffey house flag (blue with a large G in a yellow diamond) from the mainmast.
(Photo: Brodie Collection, LaTrobe Postcard Collection, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne.)

The *Austrasia* was sold by J. and W. Goffey in 1910 for £5200 to Aug. Bolten of Hamburg and renamed the *Gustav*. Three years later she was bought by Gebr. Vinnen of Hamburg and on the outbreak of the First World War was interned, along with another German-owned barque *Viking*, in the harbour of Mejillones (one of the nitrate ports) in Chile. In 1927 she was bought by Herman Engel of Hamburg who renamed her the *Melbourn* and was sold the following year for £4000 to Gustav Erikson of Mariehamn, Finland. Erikson considered renaming vessels to bring bad luck, so the *Melbourn* continued under that name for the rest of her life. The Erikson fleet was the last fleet of large deep-sea sailing vessels in the world and remained in operation right up to the start of World War II. In Gustav Erikson's hands the *Melbourn* was in the distinguished company of some famous vessels, of which a few have been preserved for posterity, including the *Pommern* now preserved at Mariehamn and the *Viking* at Gothenburg. The nearest British equivalent would probably be the barque *Arethusa* preserved on the Medway at Upnor.

In 1907 James and William put all the vessels up for sale; there was a glut of sailing vessels on the market at the time, providing rich pickings for those who could operate them economically. There would have been several reasons for winding up the business. Firstly, the steamship was taking over from the sailing ship and neither James nor William saw any future in sail. James was 75 years old and had no male heirs and William, a relative youngster of 70, had expressly stopped his only son, William Jnr., from going into the business because he could see that the days of sail were numbered. However although their days were numbered it took

sailing ships many years to die, indeed on a small scale they continue to this day. In some countries the demise of the big commercial sailing vessel was postponed due to economic circumstances for some years longer than in the U.K. Several countries around the Baltic continued to use sailing vessels and they were in common use in the Baltic timber trade well into the twentieth century. Gustav Erikson's success was partly due to being able to buy good secondhand ships very cheaply and partly due to the very high cargo rates prevalent during the First World War, particularly during the German blockade of 1916 -1917. The Grain Races date from this period, in which Erikson ships played a prominent part. On 30th June 1932 the *Melbourn*, on passage from Australia to Queenstown (Cobh, the port for Cork) with a cargo of grain was in collision with an American steamship, the *U.S.S. Seminole*, 20 miles off the Fastnet Rock lighthouse on the south coast of Ireland and was sunk with the loss of her master, Capt. Johannsson, ten members of her crew and her cargo.



The *Arethusa*. Here shown moored on the Medway opposite the entrance to Chatham dockyard in the 1960s, the *Arethusa* was a contemporary of, and about the same size as, the *Austrasia* and *Oranasia*; she can now be seen in the harbour at Boston, USA.

The crew of the *U.S.S. Seminole* admitted that they were unaware of the rule that steam should give way to sail and consequently responsibility was accepted, and compensation paid, by the *Seminole*'s owners. With the loss of the *Melbourn*, the last of the J. and W. Goffey ships disappeared and the last connection between the Goffeys and the days of the tall ships came to an end. Probably by 1932 few would have remembered the Finnish-registered *Melbourn*'s Liverpool days as J. & W. Goffey's *Austrasia*. James had been dead for twenty years by then, while William had outlived his brother by five years, having died in 1917. Perhaps William Jnr., a 48-year old Liverpool solicitor specialising in maritime law, living with his 77-year old widowed mother Mary in the old family home in Blundellsands, would have appreciated the significance of the sinking of the *Melbourn*.