

CELEBRATION

THINKING INSIDE THE BOX



The Port of Felixstowe celebrates 50 years of containerised shipping, which launched its growth and defined its character.

Raymond Bull, Stevedore and Wharf Superintendent, 1959-1976, recalls “I remember the first container being unloaded ... The very first container wot come to the dock.”

With that, Felixstowe became Britain’s leader in a revolution that would make modern society possible. Global trade today would be the barest hint of the massive force it has become. The adoption of the standard container, a steel box that can be quickly transferred from train and lorry to ships, very soon did away with the millennia-old practice of packing ships willy-nilly.

Felixstowe embraced the modern era of logistics on 1 July 1967, when Raymond Bull was a much younger dockworker. The single ship-to-shore crane stood on the New South Quay – now known as the Landguard Container Terminal – and only 152m was dedicated to this new-fangled technology. Fifty years of development has led to today’s Felixstowe boasting nine berths, over



3,000m of deep-water quays and 31 ship-to-shore cranes. Expansion of all parts of the port, from rail development to new berths to accommodate the biggest mega vessels, will see a modern Felixstowe that is faster, cleaner and more vital to the future of Britain and global trade.

THE REVOLUTION

While container-type arrangements had been used in the past, it was the standardisation that drove efficiencies which made global transport cheaper and more efficient. An American businessman, Malcolm McLean, fought governments, unions and other vested interests to create the first dedicated container ship. He believed in the efficiencies to be gained in packing more cargo into a ship and reducing time at ports, meaning the asset could be at sea earning money. He was, of course, right.

Those efficiencies lowered the cost of everything moved by ship. The Undercover Economist, Tim Harford, explains that a study of a standard cargo ship from 1954 showed that it cost about USD420 in today’s currency to ship a tonne of goods. Today, that number is about USD50 – or less.

The “Box” drove an explosion of global trade. Loading and unloading times were slashed. Sealed containers meant that theft plummeted. Safety increased dramatically. Containers were more stable, so shifting and breakage were reduced. Shipping of goods that previously took months could now be executed in weeks.



On a human level, lives have been elevated by the advent of the container. As Clemence Cheng, Managing Director, Europe Division, Hutchison Ports, explains, "The volume of trade made possible by the container has lifted large parts of the world out of poverty and continues to help developing economies to grow, and developed economies to prosper." Indeed, according to Mr Cheng, "A world without the container is unimaginable."

CONTAINERS AND HEART

This transformation started in Britain with just a few men. A number of that small complement of workers in 1967 – numbering perhaps 100 – reflect on the day that Britain joined the container revolution. It was personal.

"It was like in the forces, when I was in the Royal Air Force. You were with a group that becomes family. It's the same on the docks. You all worked together, looked after each other," said Bill Gordon, who worked on the docks from 1961 to 1991. The modern concern for safety was a real eye-opener for him. As he says of the men who worked on the docks then, "We were a rough old lot in those days ... It was a tough job and you had to be [tough]."

Of course, Felixstowe's family is much bigger now and over 2,500 people work at the port, with many more supported by the port's activities. Mr Cheng explains that Felixstowe has become, "A port that supports tens of thousands of jobs locally and adds hundreds of millions of pounds of value each year to the wider economy."

Many of those employees and their community have been celebrating the 50th anniversary – a quinquagenary – with company-supported family outings, including marching in the Felixstowe Carnival under the Port of Felixstowe banner. A jubilant dinner was held on the pre-container era cargo sailing ship, the tea clipper *Cutty Sark*, at the Royal Museums Greenwich, London. Civic leaders, foreign dignitaries and community supporters joined the celebration.

Those celebrants can look to a future that will embrace modernity as much as Felixstowe did 50 years ago. Recently, modernisation has meant expansion on land together with deepening of the approach channel (through dredging) to make way for the next generation of mega vessels, carrying up to 21,000 TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units). Berths 8 & 9, the latest expansion, provide 920m of quay with 18m of depth alongside. Eco-rubber-tyred gantry cranes help make Berths 8 & 9 the lowest carbon container terminal in the UK.

A doubling of capacity, through rail development and new rail-mounted gantry cranes in recent years greatly improves operational efficiency. More rail works to be completed in 2019 will allow up to 45 freight trains a day to run in both directions.

While the port itself was founded in 1875, containerisation transformed its fortunes and has defined it for the past 50 years. Felixstowe continues to fully embrace technology to better serve its community, its nation and global trade. □

Then and Now: The Port of Felixstowe has grown in leaps in bounds from its first container-moving crane to the recent opening of Berths 8 & 9 to accommodate the world's biggest container ships.



1967



1993



2017