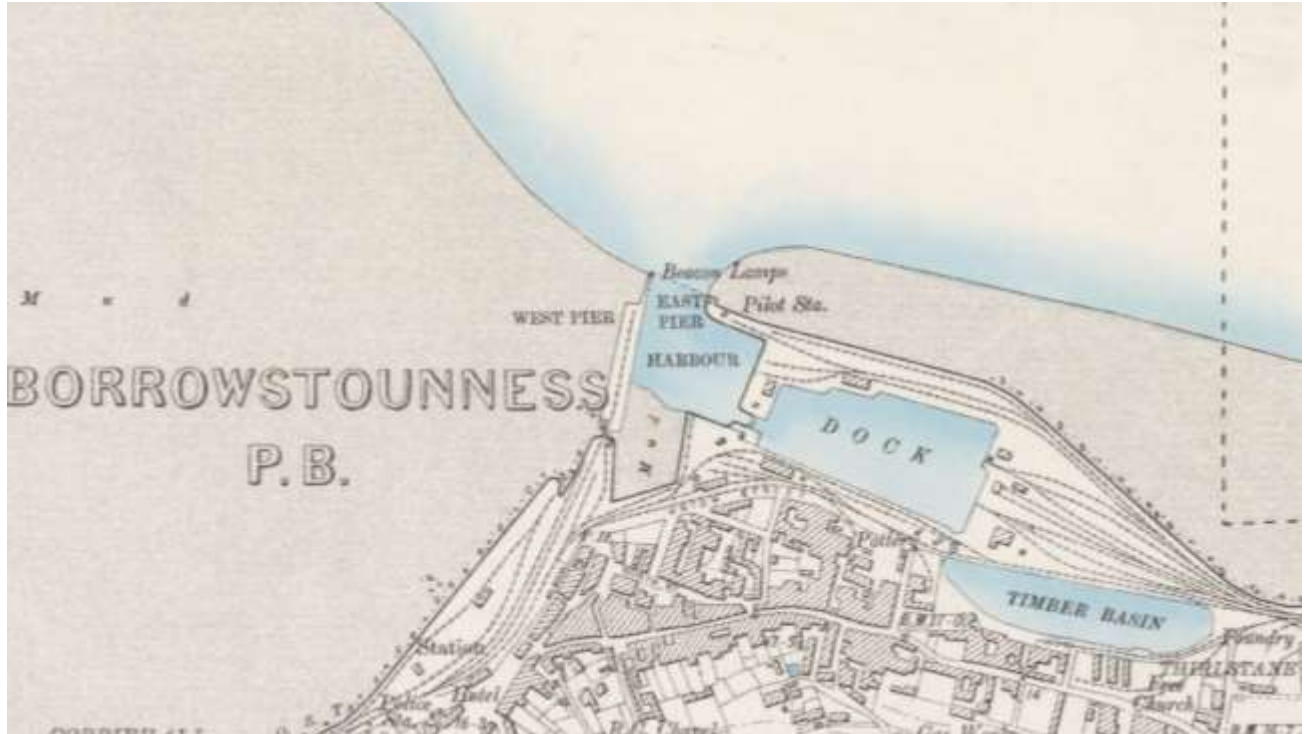


On This Day – 30th June 1959

Bo'ness Harbour closes to commercial trade after nearly 400 years



Bo'ness Harbour, 1895. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland

Bo'ness Harbour has a long and interesting history, and for years was one of the Forth's preeminent ports. Officially recognised as a port in 1601 (although it had been unofficially active since the 1560s, and possibly even earlier) it had something of a choppy start to life. The Scottish Privity Council closed it in 1602 in a bid to stem the flow of smuggled goods coming through the harbour, and it was several years before shipping trade returned.

But a century on from its opening, and Bo'ness Harbour was on the up, continuing to grow in size and importance. It was officially recognised as a Harbour by an Act of Parliament in 1707 (the importance here being that a port was solely for the import and export of goods, whereas a harbour could offer safe anchorage to ships), with the East Pier (368ft long) being constructed in 1733, and extended by another 180ft in 1787. Money for this, and the general upkeep of the site, was raised not only on an anchorage fee paid by boats, but on a very unpopular beer tax in the town. But ultimately this meant larger ships could dock at Bo'ness, and in more challenging weather conditions. In addition the Customs House was moved to the town from Blackness, centring shipping activity here.

Further enhancements to the size of the harbour followed throughout the 19th century as the town strived to keep up the reputation noted by Daniel Defoe: "it has been, and still is, a town of the greatest

trade to Holland and France of any in Scotland, except Leith”, and the harbour benefitted from a variety of local industries such as coal mining, pit-prop importing, fishing, and even whaling.

But like many smaller ports up and down the Forth it was eventually surpassed in size and stature by Grangemouth, and by improved on-land transport options – first the development of the railways, then later the road network. During World War Two the harbour was forced to close to commercial traffic as it had been turned into a temporary naval base. After this modern commercial traffic proved too large for the port to handle, and by 1959 it was closed entirely.

The physical remains of the harbour are still very evident in the town, from the inactive docks to the nearby Customs House on Union Street. Another lasting legacy in the town is Sea Box Society, which began in 1634 as a way for the skippers of Bo’ness to ensure the continuing welfare of their community – a tenth of their profit would be put into a double-locked safe, and distributed to those who had lost their ships, as well as other charitable causes in the town. Incredibly this practise has outlasted the port itself, and the group recently celebrated their 400th anniversary.

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