

Wm France, Fenwick & Co., Ltd - Renowned Colliers

Review by Geoff Walker



France, Fenwick's 1956 built, **MV Dartwood** sold out of the fleet in 1969 for continued trading, and renamed **Spalmatori Captain**, resold 1974 and renamed **Princess Aquamarine**, sent to Taiwanese breakers in 1979.

The correct name for this company was **France, Fenwick & Co. Ltd.** The Fenwick and Stobart families had each been involved in the coal trade from Sunderland from the mid-nineteenth century. In 1894 they merged to become **Fenwick, Stobart & Co.**, operating 3 steamships and 1 sailing ship. A subsidiary company, **William. France** who operated 4 steamships, also joined the new group, which became known as **Wm. France, Fenwick & Company Ltd.**, when formed on 10 July 1901. The company was primarily engaged in the coastal coal trade from the Wear and Goole to London, but occasionally they would venture to the Baltic ports, carrying coal cargoes outbound and returning with timber. Ultimately, France, Fenwick became one of the biggest collier owners in Britain, operating over 100 colliers during their 75 years of existence. All their ships had names ending in the word "**Wood**", and the company funnel colors were changed in 1956 from **WF** on the broad white band to **FF**.

Many of their ships were requisitioned by the Admiralty during the Great War. In 1914, the Admiralty directed the company to hold its entire fleet of colliers at the disposal of the Government, ready to act as fleet colliers, and commercial contracts were broken with the Gas Companies and other customers. Much of this business was lost forever as some built their own collier fleets when hostilities ended. Seven foreign colliers were also managed on behalf of the Government including **Ruth** and **Anna Sofie** and three American-built standard ships, three of these and six owned colliers being lost to enemy action together with 60 officers and men:

The Depression years were hard years in the coal trade with collier values slumping to all-time lows. Two colliers were purchased from H. Harrison Ltd., London for a total of £12,900 in 1932/33 as **Seaton** and **Taunton** and were renamed **Sherwood** and **Eastwood**. **Bushwood** and **Arnewood** of 3540 dwt joined the fleet during 1930/31 and a fourth collier of 4200 dwt was completed by Austins in 1931 as **Dalewood**. She survived World War 2 to give 27 years of service to the company, and eventually went for scrap in 1958.

Rising freight rates in 1936 led to the construction of two more small colliers of 965 dwt at the Henry Robb yard at Leith, **Rookwood**, and **Lockwood**. Three good looking engines aft colliers of varying sizes were completed at the Austin yard in 1937/38 as **Goodwood**, **Gwynwood** and **Monkwood**; with the last named serving 21 years with the company.

Gwynwood was built for the Goole trade, giving France, Fenwicks a fleet of 24 colliers at that time. This included the recently purchased **Marlwood** of 1924 which had been completed as Fellside for Connell & Grace and had been on charter to the company as Swandale in the Goole trade, and was to continue in the Goole liner service until broken up at Dunston-on-Tyne in 1957.

During World War 2, a further twelve ships were sunk, and 29 lives lost. The fleet suffered heavily at the hands of the enemy during the War.

10.9.1939 **Goodwood** torpedoed and sunk off Flamborough Head on a voyage Tyne/Bayonne with coal.

3.8.1940 **Wychwood** mined and sunk 4 miles from Shipwash L.V. on a voyage Blyth/London with coal.

3.1.1941 **Pinewood** mined and sunk off Southend pier on a voyage London/Blyth in ballast.

4.2.1941 **Gwynwood** mined and sunk off the Humber on a voyage London/ Sunderland in ballast.

10.6.1941 **Moorwood** bombed and sunk off Whitby on a voyage London/Blyth in ballast.

25.6.1941 **Dashwood** bombed and sunk to NE of Cromer on a voyage London/ Sunderland in ballast.

6.8.1941 **Deerwood** wrecked on Haisbro' sands, one of six losses in a convoy.

1.1.1942 **Kentwood** mined and sunk in Hearty Knoll channel on a voyage Blyth/London with coal.

26.1.1942 **Hawkwood** wrecked in Tees Bay on a voyage Blyth/London with coal.

23.4.1942 **Chatwood** mined and sunk off The Wash on a voyage Tyne/London with coal.

18.9.1942 **Fernwood** bombed and sunk at Dartmouth.

22.2.1945 **Goodwood** torpedoed and sunk off Lowestoft on a voyage Blyth/London with coal.

In 1946 **Coastwise Colliers Ltd.** was formed by **W. Cory & Son, Stephenson Clarke, and France Fenwick** to charter colliers to the County of London Electricity Company, on a long-term basis. A sizeable fleet of 12 colliers was quickly built up by newbuildings, and transfers from the three fleets. These vessels were given names with a 'Col' prefix and managed by **France, Fenwick.**

However, with the nationalization of the electricity industry in 1949, all were returned to their parent fleets, including the new **Coleford** of 1948, which became **Bestwood.**

Ten ships had been completed for the company during the war, together with a specially designed ship, for the carriage of gun turrets, **Sound Fisher**, completed by Austin in 1941. A joint venture had been set-up with James Fisher & Sons Ltd. of Barrow for two such ships, the Fisher ship being **Sea Fisher**. They both had extremely long and wide hatchways at 76 feet in length with circular bulges on both sides to take the turrets. Despite near misses, both ships survived the war, the France, Fenwick ship of the joint venture became the **Colnbrook** in 1946, and **Portwood** in 1949.

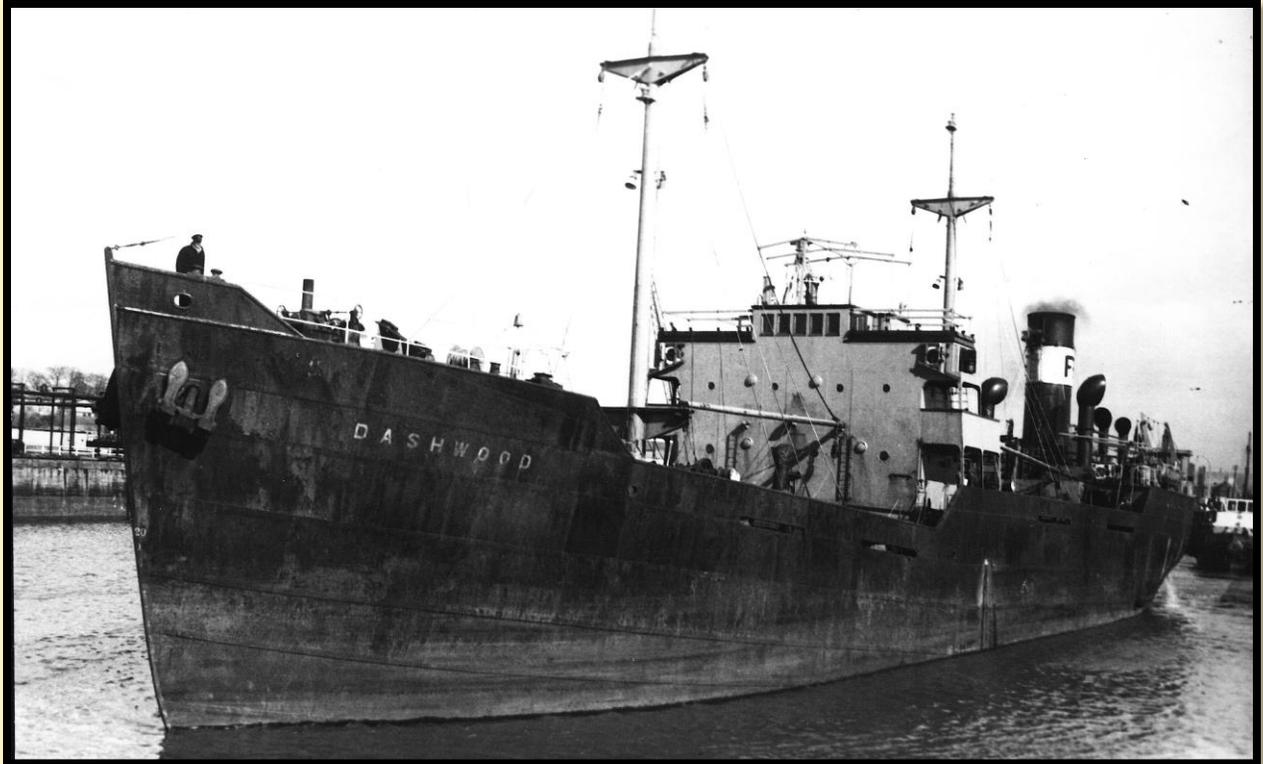


Standard collier **Birdwood** built 1945 as a steamship but converted to diesel engine in 1959. 1968 sold, and renamed **San Javier**, resold 1970 and renamed **Amacuro**, onsold in 1973 to become **Tacamari**. Taken to Cartagena, Colombia, in 1979 for demolition.

Four, standard colliers, of 2900 dwt were then purchased in 1946, and renamed **Arnewood, Braywood, Dashwood** and **Kentwood** and were converted to oil firing.

Arnewood and **Dashwood**, now with greater range, made occasional Transatlantic voyages to Canada to take part in the St. Lawrence coal trade during the summer months.

Two vessels with engines amidships, as Baltic timber carriers, were completed by Austins in 1949/50 as **Goodwood** and **Wychwood**. However, the British demand for pit props and sawn wood was mostly carried in German owned ships, and the pair spent a lot of time bringing bulk sugar from the West Indies, and esparto grass from North Africa at highly lucrative freight rates. **Wychwood** was lost on one of these voyages in August, 1955 when she stranded 10 miles from Gibbs Hill Light while on a voyage from Walton (NS) to Trinidad with Baryta, but later sank off Bermuda, while under tow.



Built in 1946 the collier **Dashwood**, Launched as **Empire Lambeth** for the British Government, MOWT. Completed as **Dashwood** for Wm. France, Fenwick & Co Ltd. Taken to Hendrik Ido Ambacht in June 1961 for demolition

The fleet had recovered by 1954 to one of 24 colliers and tramps of 63,500 dwt, with four ships on order at North East coast shipyards. This total included the new engines aft raised quarterdeck tramps **Rushwood** and **Rookwood** of 7860 dwt completed by the John Readhead yard in South Shields in 1952/53. This pair had five holds with two masts and four derricks with a pair of kingposts with more derricks behind the midships bridge. Consideration had been given for some time for an entry into the deep-sea tramp trades so that the company would not be entirely dependent on the diminishing coal trade. The new tramps were built with an eye on the West Indies bulk sugar trade, but sugar rates fell to an unacceptable low level and the pair were employed in Canadian waters and general world-wide tramping. They were fitted with triple expansion engines with Bauer Wach exhaust turbines to give a service speed of 13 knots.

The fleet in 1959 consisted of 18 colliers and tramps. The company's fifth deep sea tramp was completed later that year at the South Shields yard of Readhead as **Granwood** of 11340 dwt fitted with a 7cylinder diesel engine of 6300 bhp giving a service speed of 14 knots.

The Sulzer engined Longfellow of 5625 dwt was purchased in 1961 and renamed **Bushwood**, and was used in both the coal trades and general tramping. A large Spanish built tramp of 9450 grt was completed at the Bilbao yard as **Chatwood** in April, 1963, with five holds, four of them forward of the the bridge and a total of 17 derricks on four masts including one heavy lift derrick of 60 tons capacity.



Good looking **Dalewood** built in 1966 for France, Fenwick. Sold to 1974 with change of name to **Cymbeline** and owner to Hadley Shipping Co Ltd. Resold 1984 change of name to **Green Rock** and owner Graig Shipping plc. Onsold 1986 with change of name to **Rocky** and owner Rockshire Shipping Co NV. In 1986, while sheltering from heavy weather in Ashdod Harbour, the vessel was driven aground south of Ashdod after her moorings had parted. She was broken up in situ.

The last steam colliers in the fleet, **Helmwood** and **Bearwood** of 1955/56 were sold in 1968, along with **Birdwood** of 1945 which had been converted into a motorship to prolong her life and to participate in the deep-sea trades. The fleet at the beginning of 1969 consisted of five deep sea tramps **Dartwood**, **Deerwood**, **Granwood**, **Chatwood** and the recently purchased **Sherwood**, and three motor colliers for the falling North East coal trade the sisters **Chelwood** and **Dalewood** of 1964 from the Bartram yard and **Bushwood** formerly Longfellow. **Chatwood** was sold on 24th February, 1969 to Messageries Maritime of Marseilles while lying at Yokohama for use on Indian Ocean liner trades. Later that year, the bulk carrier **Star Pinewood** of 29,500 dwt was completed by Cammell, Laird on Merseyside and fitted with gantry cranes in Norway to operate in the Norwegian controlled Star consortium. By 1972 with falling freight rates, and diminishing coastal coal trade, the company gradually withdrew from ship owning and the fleet was placed under the management of Houlder Bros until the company was sold in 1974, to the Jessel Securities finance group.

The remaining four ships were then sold off, **Star Pinewood** going to the Blandford Shipping Co. Ltd. (Fred Olsen) as **Star Bulford**, and **Sherwood** was sold to Greek interests and renamed as Nisyros Era. However, the two sister colliers **Chelwood** and **Dalewood** were acquired separately by Houlder and by the Hadley Shipping Co. Ltd. to become **Oswestry Grange** and **Cymbeline** respectively They continued in the North East coal trade until dislodged by a trio of 22,000 dwt super colliers owned by the CEBG in 1985.



The 1959 built **Granwood**, 1971 sold and named changed to **Penny Michaels**, 1976 resold and renamed **Lamda**, 1980 onsold to become, **Blue Danube** and finally, renamed **Belmonte** 1981, under new ownership. Broken up at Chittagong in 1982.



1955 built **Deerwood** sold 1969 and renamed **Sebastiano**. Resold 1976 and named **Morcote**, 1977 renamed **Feni**, 1979 sold and named **Kyklops**. 1980 changed name to **Sirlad** under new ownership. The vessel suffered serious damage due to an explosion in January 1982 and taken to Split for breaking shortly thereafter.

And so, ended another iconic British collier and tramp company that provided sterling service for more than 75 years.

References: Various Wm France, Fenwick corporate archives, Allen Collection and Black Diamond Fleets by N.L. Middlemiss

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