

“A Business Unique”
The Wilson Line of Hull, 1840-1916

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Lecture Outline

Problem: *Given the large scale and broad scope of their firm, how did the Wilson family retain ownership and control from the mid 19th century to 1916?*

1. A Business Unique?

Scale
Scope
Longevity

2. Modus Operandi

Management
Labour Relations
Networks of Agents, Allies & Family Members

3. Strategies

Operational
Structural
Managerial

4. Wider Significance

Local Factors & Large-Scale Enterprise
The Family Firm: Strengths & Weaknesses

The aim of the lecture is to examine and explain the development of the Wilson Line from the 1850s to 1916, a period during which the firm expanded rapidly to become one of the largest enterprises in the British shipping industry.

The lecture addresses a problem:

“given the large scale and broad scope of their firm, how did the Wilson family retain ownership and control from the mid-19th century to 1916?”

This will be addressed in four parts:

- Part 1 - establish whether the Wilson Line was unique
- Parts 2& 3 - solutions to problem
- Part 4 - what does it all mean?

A Business Unique?

In 1905, Charles Wilson, the chairman of Thomas Wilson, Sons & Co. Ltd., asserted that his family had created “a Business Unique in the world’s history”. It is surprising that a man who was regarded as rather taciturn – a bluff Yorkshireman – should utter such an immodest, if not boastful, statement. Yet there was some truth in his judgement, as an examination of the evolution of the Wilson Line reveals.

In terms of its origins and character, however, the company was far from unique. It had its genesis in merchanting, like countless other shipping enterprises of the period. Thomas Wilson, the founder of the firm, was a merchant engaged in the import of Swedish iron ore into the port of Hull. In the 1840s he began investing in the shipping element of his merchanting business, buying shares in a number of sailing vessels employed in Hull’s Scandinavian trades. In the early 1850s, Thomas Wilson began investing in steamships. Though steamers were few in number and limited in range at this time, Wilson’s interest in the new technology was not unusual in the port of Hull. Here, shipowners and merchants were quick to embrace steam, so much so that in 1869 64% of Hull’s registered fleet was steam powered, the national figure being 16%.

From its inception, Thos Wilson, Sons & Co. was a family firm – that is, a company owned and managed by members of the same family. Again, this was by no means distinctive, for the family firm was the most common form of corporate structure in the 19th century. On the eve of the First World War, for example, 80% of registered

joint-stock companies were privately owned. Even in the 1990s no less a figure than Sir John Harvey Jones commented that ‘family firms comprise 75% of all businesses in the U.K’. In the shipping industry, family-run enterprises were common, especially in Hull, which proved to be a veritable bastion of the family firm. In the 1840s, as Gordon Jackson has observed, it was privately owned firms such as Gee & Co., Henry Atkinson & Son and Henry Briggs which pioneered the shift from sail to steam. Moreover, as late as 1907, less than 10% of Hull’s shipping fleet was owned by publicly owned joint stock concerns.

In other ways, however, there was much substance behind Charles Wilson’s claim that his business was unique. It was certainly very distinctive in three key respects:

(i) Scale

First, the scale of the Wilson Line set it apart from other family shipping firms. This can be seen in the size of the Wilson fleet. Entering the steam shipping business in the early 1850s, the firm experienced rapid growth through the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s. Though the dynamic expansion of the fleet slackened off in the 1890s, the Wilson Line entered the 20th century with a capital stock of over 100 steamers with an aggregate tonnage of almost 120,000 tons.

At this juncture, the *Times* referred to the Wilson Line as the “largest privately-owned shipping line in the world”. The scale of the company was also impressive from a local perspective. From the early 1890s down to the Great War, the Wilson Line owned at least half of the tonnage registered in the port of Hull, the peak being reached in 1901 when 61.4% of Hull’s merchant shipping fleet sported the green and red livery of the Wilsons. No firm achieved such preponderance in any other major British port.

(ii) Scope

Related to the scale of the firm was the second distinctive feature, the scope of its operations. At its peak in the early 20th century, the Wilson Line despatched its steamers on 25 regular lines. While most started and terminated at Hull, the company’s vessels steamed to Scandinavia, the Baltic and northwest Europe, to the Mediterranean and Adriatic, to New York and Boston, and eastwards to Bombay and Calcutta. The firm also ran some coastal lines, including the unique service, which connected Hull with Liverpool around the north of Scotland.

While the Wilson Line was the only Hull firm to provide its home port with such a range of shipping services, it extended the scope of its business to embrace shipbuilding, fishing and marine engineering interests, as well as a stake in Hull's docks and railway companies (more of this later).

(iii) Longevity

Thos. Wilson Sons & Co was unique – or at least highly unusual – in a third respect – the length of time it was owned and managed by members of the Wilson family. As Mary Rose has asserted for the nineteenth century: “very few British firms survived for more than one generation, let alone three.” More recently, in the 1980s, the London Business School reported “only 30% of family businesses reach the second generation [while] only 13% survive through the third generation.” The Wilson Line did rather better than average. Founded by Thomas Wilson in 1840, the firm was transferred by legal deed to Thomas' youngest sons, Charles and Arthur, in 1861.

The two brothers ran the business until the end of their lives in 1907 and 1909 respectively. At that point, the company passed into the hands of the third generation Wilsons, with Arthur's son Kenneth acting as Chairman, and Charles' son, Tommy, serving as vice-chairman until the firm was sold to Ellerman Lines in 1916.

Thus, for over three-quarters of a century, the Wilson Line was owned by three generations of Wilsons. Moreover, for much of that time the Wilson Line was managed by Wilsons. In the process, as one might imagine, the Wilsons became very wealthy. Theirs proved to be a highly profitable business. The firm's accounts indicate that the Wilson Line turned a profit and paid dividends in every year from 1891 to 1916. This profitability was reflected in the affluence of the Wilson family. While Charles Wilson purchased a landed estate outside York in the 1870s, Arthur contented himself with a mansion on the outskirts of Hull where the Prince of Wales and other members of the Victorian social elite were entertained on their visits to the north. The Wilsons also owned property in the South of France, the north of Scotland and in Central London. Accompanying this wealth was social position, both in Hull and nationally, and also a political role – with Charles serving as Liberal MP for West Hull for over 30 years.

Such wealth, and the social, political and other distractions that it entailed, make it all the more remarkable that the family remained fully in control of their large-scale, wide-ranging enterprise for such a long time and through three generations.

Let's now consider how this unique achievement came about – just how did the Wilsons create a major shipping enterprise without losing the ability, the resources or, indeed the will to manage it?

In answering this question, a whole range of factors might be advanced to explain the unique development and success of the Wilson Line. These can best be understood under two broad headings:

- (i) the *modus operandi* of the firm
- (ii) the *short-term strategies* adopted by the firm

(2) *Modus Operandi*

For the firm to have grown to such a size while owned and managed by a limited number of individuals related by birth, we have to assume that its day-to-day operations were efficient and effective. This was accomplished via three means:

(i) Management

Down to 1900 the direction of the firm clearly lay in the hands of firstly Thomas Wilson to 1861, and then with Charles and Arthur for the next four decades. Though specific evidence is lacking, it can be surmised that the two brothers were blessed with entrepreneurial skills. In the 1860s and 1870s, they developed their business by purchasing cheap, second hand vessels and operating them in the Scandinavian and Baltic trades that their father had engaged in over the previous 40 years. They were not averse to taking risks, however. The establishment of lines to the Indian sub-continent, the eastern Mediterranean, and the United States were regarded as bold initiatives by contemporaries who were equally surprised when these trades – which were unprecedented in Hull – immediately generated profits.

As these new trades, together with the more established European routes, prospered, so the Wilson brothers began to improve the quality, as well as the size, of their fleets. A measured policy of vessel replacement was adopted, with the older 'rattletraps' – as Charles called them – sold or scrapped, as new vessels were acquired. From the mid 1880s, as competition intensified and better safety and accommodation standards were imposed, the Wilsons concentrated on the qualitative, as opposed to the quantitative, improvement of their fleet. Throughout the period, the capital for vessel

purchase came from within the company or, occasionally, from within the family, with no recourse to outside borrowing.

This was low-cost management. The two brothers seemingly dictated and directed policy without external assistance and without being accountable to shareholders. It was a form of management that relied heavily on the qualities of the individual directors, and this was to cause problems for the Wilson brothers from the 1890s (as we shall see). It was also a form of management that relied on two broad non-family groups:

(ii) Labour relations

The first of these groups was the workforce employed by the Wilson line. Though detailed evidence is once more lacking, it would seem that the Wilson brothers realised the importance of maintaining good relations with their administrative staff, their cargo handling labourers and their seafarers.

For instance, during the late 1880s the Wilsons encouraged the formation of a closed shop by the newly established National Seafarers and Firemen's Union, an arrangement that brought the two brothers into conflict with the Shipping Federation in 1893. The bone of contention here was the Wilson's pro-labour stance in the Hull Dock Strike. When forced by his fellow shipowners to lock out the labourers, Charles Wilson was bitterly upset, feeling that he had let his workforce down. This he regretted for the remainder of his life – a clear indication that treating his labour force well, and cultivating their loyalty, were important objectives in his management strategy.

(iii) Networks of agents and allies

The Wilsons also relied on the information and labour of an array of agents and allies, both in Hull and in the ports and regions with which they had dealings. These network connections were absolutely vital to the operation of the firm. They included family members. Thomas Wilson and his wife produced no less than 15 children, and this proved to be an important advantage to the shipping firm. On occasion, family members injected capital into the company, the most important source being the eldest son, David. A wine merchant by trade, David provided mortgages to support the vessel purchasing policies of his younger brothers. Another brother, John West Wilson, was despatched by Thomas Wilson to Gothenburg, where he served as the firm's agent for

many years, eventually setting up his own merchanting business, which survives to this day.

Over the years, moreover, a dense network of agents developed at home and abroad. This was especially significant in the Baltic and Scandinavian trades, with agents such as Helsing & Grimm of Riga handling cargoes for the Wilson steamers, and feeding commercial intelligence back to Hull. Such agents were critical to the operation of the emigrant trade. They had connections far inland who persuaded Russian peasants to purchase a ticket that would convey them from their homes to New York via Hull - (on a Wilson Line steamer) – and Liverpool.

Cultivated over many years, these networks gave the Wilsons a key advantage when competition intensified in the Baltic in the early 20th century. This enabled the Wilsons to fend off much weightier rivals. For instance, in 1904, the British Foreign Office enquired into the activities of the Hamburg-America Line, the largest steamship line in the world. It discovered that the German grants, together with North German Lloyd and the Scandinavia-America Line, controlled 97.5% of a North Atlantic pooling agreement. The remaining 2.5% belonged to the Wilson Line. The Foreign Office considered why the other operators tolerated the small proportion allocated to the family firm from Hull. Its answer was:

“the Hamburg-America Packet Co. would have gladly rid themselves of the Wilson Line altogether, but was afraid of the potential competition of the Wilson Line – there being always present a possibility of the Wilson Line running into the Baltic ports in opposition to the Hamburg-America Company”

In other words, the mighty state-supported German firm did not feel it had the strength to challenge the entrenched position of the Wilsons and their long-established agents in the Baltic.

So the Wilson Line operated with a minimalist management structure that depended heavily on the personal qualities of the principals, the co-operation of the workforce, and the development of a supportive and well-organised network of allies and agents. At the same time, the firm needed to implement appropriate strategies if it was to prosper and to remain in the ownership, and under the control, of the founding family.

(3) Strategies

The firm's strategies were of three broad types (i) operation, (ii) structural and (iii) managerial.

(i) **The Operational Strategies** were essentially designed to expand or retain the Wilson Line's market share in the face of competition that from time to time threatened its business interests. While many strategies were implemented during the firms' long lifetime, two examples will suffice to demonstrate its business techniques: The first is drawn from the early years of the 20th century, when the Wilson trades with the eastern Baltic ports of St. Petersburg, Riga and Libau were encroached upon by DFDS – the large, state-supported Danish company based in Copenhagen.

This was striking at the heart of the Wilson's shipping business, because the Baltic trades were pivotal in the firm's complex of lines. The Wilsons responded in three ways:

- (i) **Aggression:** DFDS was threatened with a price war, the Wilsons proposing to meet the Danish competition by charging a nil rate on cargoes out of these ports for six months.
- (ii) **Acquisition:** DFDS was outmanoeuvred as the Wilsons acquired the vessels and trades of a third player in the Baltic game – the Hull family firm of Bailey and Leatham.
- (iii) **Agreement:** DFDS was then obliged to come to terms with the Wilson Line – the two firms agreeing in 1903 to absent themselves from each other's Baltic trades and home ports.

As the Wilsons wrote, somewhat triumphantly:

“Hull is our home port, Copenhagen is yours, and we think if both companies will recognise each other's rights in the Baltic trade, a much more friendly spirit will spring up, tending to better financial result than heretofore.”

The second example relates to the operations of the Wilson Line in Hull. Here monopolistic tendencies were evident. As early as the mid-1880s, there were complaints in local newspapers that the Wilsons were building a “monopoly in the Baltic trade, having ruthlessly driven their opponents out of their path so that they are now masters of the situation.”

In the early 20th century, this trend continued. Having swallowed up Bailey and Leetham, the Wilsons invested in a range of other Hull firms:

- They acquired the shipbuilding firm of Earles
- They acquired the marine engineering company of Amos & Smith
- They invested in the fisheries by purchasing a stake in the newly established “Hull Steam Fishing & Ice Company”.

This was seemingly a simple strategy of diversification from shipping into related maritime industries. But it was marked by two factors:

- (i) this diversification involved the investment of relatively small sums in Hull enterprises that were either bankrupt, ailing or small in scale.
- (ii) It was not undertaken for purposes of vertical integration, but largely to prevent outside investors from establishing a foothold in Hull.

Such diversification was somewhat irrational from a purely business point of view, as these firms generated little income for the Wilsons. But it was logical from another perspective, as it strengthened the position of the firm in its home port, and therefore added to its commercial viability and enhanced the durability of the Wilson dynasty.

(ii) Structural

In terms of the structure of their enterprise, the Wilsons implemented significant changes at key stages in the firm’s development. In this respect, the aims of the firm’s directors were not to improve the scale or scope of the business, but to ensure that it remained firmly in the control of the family – dynastic aims.

The first structural alteration occurred in 1861, when the founder of the company, Thomas Wilson, formally handed over the running of the business to Charles and Arthur. The timing of this transfer of power is telling, for Thomas appears to have relinquished control when he was in good health – he lived for a further 8 years.

Under the stewardship of the two sons, the firm expanded rapidly, a sign that Thomas timed his retirement to perfection.

A more significant structural change was effected in 1891 when the firm was transformed from a partnership into a private limited company.

With a capital of £2m, the new firm of 'Thos Wilson Sons & Co. Ltd' was divided among 7 shareholders – Charles & Arthur Wilson, their wives, sons and a nephew. Though there is little evidence as to why the Wilsons decided to take this step at this time, it would seem that Charles and Arthur were preparing the ground for the transfer of the firm to their successors. The adoption of limited liability was a clear sign that the Wilson brothers wanted to safeguard their stake in the firm in the event of its collapse.

(iii) Managerial

It was also related to the concerns that Charles and Arthur were expressing in their private correspondence, as to the ability of their sons and heirs to manage their large-scale enterprise. Charles Wilson put it quite bluntly when he wrote that: “neither his nor Mr Arthur Wilson’s sons seem likely to take management off their hands”.

Given this predicament, Charles and Arthur began a search for someone from outside the firm who could provide the entrepreneurial input that they themselves had supplied for thirty years.

Limited liability enabled Charles and Arthur to pass their firm on to their successors, while facilitating the appointment of a salaried manager who could run the business on behalf of the third generation Wilsons. This, in effect, happened during the mid 1890s, when Charles and Arthur were in their 60s, they exploited their network connections to identify a manager who could develop the business while maintaining its independence and family ownership. After a patient search, they more or less headhunted Oswald Sanderson, a man they had had dealings with as agent for their New York sailings.

Sanderson took up the post of manager in 1900, was allocated some shares and a directorship in 1905, and managed the firm on behalf of the third generation Wilsons down to 1916. In essence, it was Sanderson who took the reins from Charles and Arthur Wilson, and it was Sanderson who did more than anyone to resolve the dilemma of retaining family control over a large-scale, wide-ranging business corporation down to WW1. The company archives suggest his influence whereas the financial records of the firm are thin and patchy down to 1904, from 1905 – when Sanderson took over completely – there is a series of detailed annual financial statements, fleet analyses, and

market reports. Essentially, the management of the business was re-organised so that its efficiency greatly improved – a critical factor in the early years of the 20th century when freight rates were depressed and competition was intense.

FINDINGS

What does this tale of the fabled Wilson Line tell us about British shipping and British business in the late 19th and early 20th centuries? I think that it offers two main insights:

(1) It sheds light on the development of large-scale enterprise in British shipping. In particular, it adds a local dimension to Gordon Boyce's broad analysis of big business during the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. Boyce's work is admirable in its industry-wide approach – yet it tends to ignore the influence of local factors in shaping the emergence of major shipping lines. In the case of the Wilsons, the fact that the firm was founded in Hull, flourished in Hull, and came to dominate Hull's maritime economy, was a major influence on the strategy, structure and performance of the company.

In turn, as the Wilson Line expanded, its policies and investments played a significant role in the development of Hull's economy. This was clearly evident after the First World War when Ellerman's Wilson Line contracted steadily, leaving a hole in Hull's economy that in many ways has never been adequately filled.

(2) Secondly, the ownership and management of this unique large-scale concern reveals something about the effectiveness or otherwise of the family firm as a corporate form, - an issue which has divided business historians for many years. Hence, the evidence of the Wilson Line is ambiguous. Quite clearly, the firm prospered as a private family enterprise, its simple ownership pattern and limited management structure proving conducive to long term growth and profitability.

What is more, the family devised and deployed strategies that led to sustained expansion without loss of family control. However, the Wilson Line was also afflicted by weaknesses that are deemed to be inherent in the family enterprise: - inter-personal friction, the waning commitment of later generations, and the sacrifice of business assets for personal financial gain. While these problems were overcome or suppressed for over 70 years, in 1916 the Wilson Line was rocked by the erratic behaviour of Tommy Wilson, the son and heir of Charles Wilson.

In the midst of war, with vessels lost, markets closed and resources scarce, Tommy not only wanted to raise cash by selling the firm's newest steamer, but also provoked a bitter row with the only non-Wilson member of the Board, Oswald Sanderson. Faced with a difficult market, and despairing of Tommy's volatility, the third generation Wilsons, together with Charles' wife, the Dowager Lady Nunburnholme, suddenly lost faith in their substantial, long established enterprise.

As a consequence, in October 1916, with no fuss and little warning, the Wilsons sold their "business unique" to Ellerman Lines Ltd for some £4.3m.

The Wilson Line, 1840-1939:

Organisational Structure

<u>Year</u>	<u>Form</u>	<u>Principal(s)</u>
1840-1861	partnership	Thomas Wilson (founder)
1861-1891	partnership	Charles Wilson Arthur Wilson
1891-1916	private limited company	Charles Wilson (1891-1907) Arthur Wilson (1907-09) Kenneth Wilson (1909-16)
		<i>managing director: Oswald Sanderson (1905-16)</i>

Ellerman's Wilson Line

1916-1939	branch firm <i>branch manager:</i>	John Ellerman <i>Oswald Sanderson (1916-26)</i>
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