

## Wakefield and the D-Day landings

The Wakefield waterfront played a part in the testing of landing craft which were built in Wakefield and were in service on D-Day, 6 June 1944.

In 1943, Charles Drake, of the Wakefield shopfitting firm of Drake and Warters, obtained a contract to build 16 Landing Craft Assault or LCAs. The contract was later extended for 72 of the vessels. They were built in 72 days. In order to fulfil this contract a quick expansion of the labour force was required and 800 girls were taken on. The preferred age of the women workers was 15 to 30, and one noticed the number of educated women working in the factory; but skill, the experienced foreman would tell you, had nothing to do with education. The vast majority of the girls had never worked before. Those who came from other employment were, primarily, shop assistants or shorthand typists. Some had been receptionists. The firm had been founded in 1924 by Drake and his partner, Robert Warters. It had premises in Thornhill Street and the company was christened 'the boat builders of Back Street' by the Navy. So unusual was this development that the BBC Radio interviewed Charles Drake and a newsreel was made which is preserved as part of the Pathe archive. Drake's nephew by marriage, Eric Bradley, saw the film whilst serving as a Captain on the staff in Bombay. These small boats were used on D-Day to transport soldiers from large troop ships to the beaches.

They were simple flat-bottomed craft with armour on them, 43 feet long, with a 10 foot 6 inch beam, and weighed 12.5 tonnes. The engines that were fitted to the original 16 were conversions of motor car engines, carried out by Robert Warters' brother, Harry often Ford V-8's. They were built on specially produced jigs in the factory, and due to shortage of teak and plywood, mahogany was used in their place. Wearing their grey overalls, and forged into a team by Robert Warters. The girls not only planked the hull and built the frames, they made the internal fittings, and oil and water coolers. Female electricians made the instrument boards and switch panels. They worked too on the sheet metalling. The highly skilled girls worked on the adaptation of aero engines to marine use. Harry Warters fitted the engines and was a gifted mechanic. The female workers' duties also included tapping the screws, the hammering of thousands of rivets, tightening of hundreds of nuts and bolts and to give the craft the necessary strength, they also bolted on and manufactured the armour plate, assisted in the installation of engines and gave the craft their final coat of grey paint. The craft had two half decks to afford the infantry on board protection during landing and had plate armour capable of turning a machine gun bullet. The later LCAs were fitted with two purpose-built Austin engines capable of developing 390hp each. Fully laden with 50 troops, and equipped with machine guns and mortars, the

craft had a draught of less than 2ft and the propellers were shielded in shallow tunnels to prevent damage upon landing.

One great advance made in the production of the craft was the establishment of a central brain, albeit in 1944, to establish the supply from all the small factories; it would order so many craft from a place and provide the required number of pieces from the keel to a screw and deliver it to them, like a conveyor belt, by road or rail, at the precise moment that a place needed them. Central stores were set up, and daily lorries or the railways collected the next portions of the craft required. You could have an LCA delivered to the factory in pieces like a giant jigsaw in its component parts. The first LCA's were made from scratch, with only the aid of diagrams, blueprints and input from a Mr Lehman, who was appointed to assist in their construction by the MOD.

One novel aspect of the contract was the fact that Wakefield was, and still is, land locked, the factory being a mile from the nearest waterway. Once finished an LCA was rolled out of the work's main entrance, and a special frame was erected to load the LCA onto the back of a low loader, nicknamed the 'Queen Mary'. They were then taken by road to Earnshaw's Timber Yard in Doncaster Road, a distance of nearly a mile, where a slipway was constructed. The craft were then launched into the canal to run trials, a system controlled by Naval Officers and the MOD. The first trip was several miles along the Aire and Calder Navigation, through a series of locks, to the River Aire at Knottingley. Here in the presence of Naval experts, the craft had to pass their tests on a measured mile, and prove that they were capable of achieving the required speed. Few naval craft have such a peculiar start to life as these assault craft built in Yorkshire. The Naval officers present at the tests were Lieutenant Charles Warren and Sub Lieutenant Geoffrey Canadine. Later Charles Drake carried out the tests on a measured mile from the Flood Lock to the Chain Bridge taking the Denby Dale Road over the canalised River Calder.

The first LCA, no 1141, was launched on 13<sup>th</sup> October 1943, and was a thrilling day for the employees of Drake & Warters and the citizens of Wakefield who flocked to see 'Wakefield's War Effort'. The first craft took 6 weeks and four days to build from laying of the keel. By the first launch seven other craft were on the stocks in various stages of construction, and by 1944 there was a launch a week.

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