



Sproston's Dry Dock of October 26, 1867

Steamers of British Guiana

And so have disappeared over the horizon that regal age of the Steamers of Guyana, what some of us might have experienced and also what our foreparents spoke so fondly of.

By Dmitri Allicock

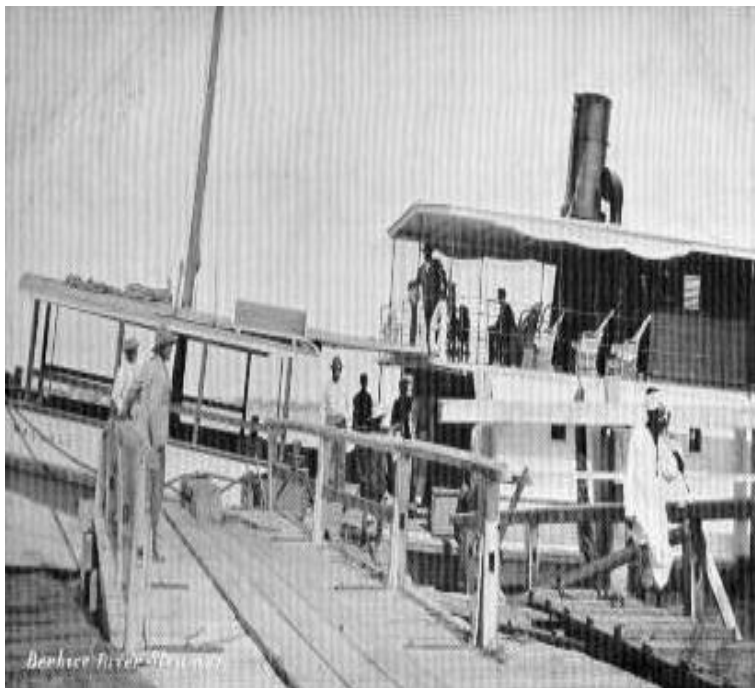
The cautious introduction of steam propulsion to vessels in British Guiana brought the golden age of sailing ships and the reliance on the currents of the wind to an end in the 1800s and launched an era of both commercial and passenger steamships in early Guyana.

The steamer service in Guyana dates back to the early 19th century when the colonial government contracted a few privately-owned steamers to provide transportation for commuters and for shipping of produce. The first official documentation of a steamer service can be traced to the establishment of a Local Steamer Navigation Company, which appears to have been founded in 1825. This company commenced operations in 1826 with the **Cambria**, an immigrant ship, which was purchased for the sum of \$50,000.

A few years later, the colonial authorities on August 24, 1828 established a steamer service across the Demerara River. In 1838, ten years later, operations were expanded as the steamer **Royal Victoria** commenced operations between Georgetown, Essequibo and Berbice. The transportation route was soon extended to the island of Leguan when **Lady Flora Hastings** was contracted on August 12, 1841.

Entered **Hugh Sproston** into 1840 Demerara to manage the interests of a London ship owner with whom he had worked when he was only 15 years old. Five years later he established his own business, originally as a merchant. The pressing need for a regular steamer service caught his attention and a few years later he established Sprostons Limited.

Born in Gibraltar, in the year 1819, Hugh Sprostons became an export merchant and ship owner, based in London. His ships were: '**Berbice**' Built 1859, '**Georgetown**' " 1873, '**Lady Longden**' " 1876, '**Princess**' " 1876, '**Guiana**' " 1879, '**Charlestown**' " 1880, '**Sproston Wood**' "1881, '**Cuyuni**' "1883, (Sproston Wood was the name of the house where the Sprostons of Wrenbury lived) and he was one of the most prominent personalities of the latter half of 1800s in British Guiana. His shipping business became synonymous with the glory days of growth and the foundational development of Guyana.



Berbice River Steamer

During the early years of operating a steamer service, many of the flat-bottomed vessels were damaged and had to be repaired in the United States, as there existed no dry dock facilities in British Guiana for repairs and making vessels seaworthy.

At the request of Hugh Sproston a team of British and American engineers surveyed several areas in Guyana, capable of holding ships 200 feet long with an estimated weight of 800 tons. An area at Charlestown was selected but the early efforts left Sproston close to ruin, as the Cofferdam erected to protect the docks gave way, destroying everything.

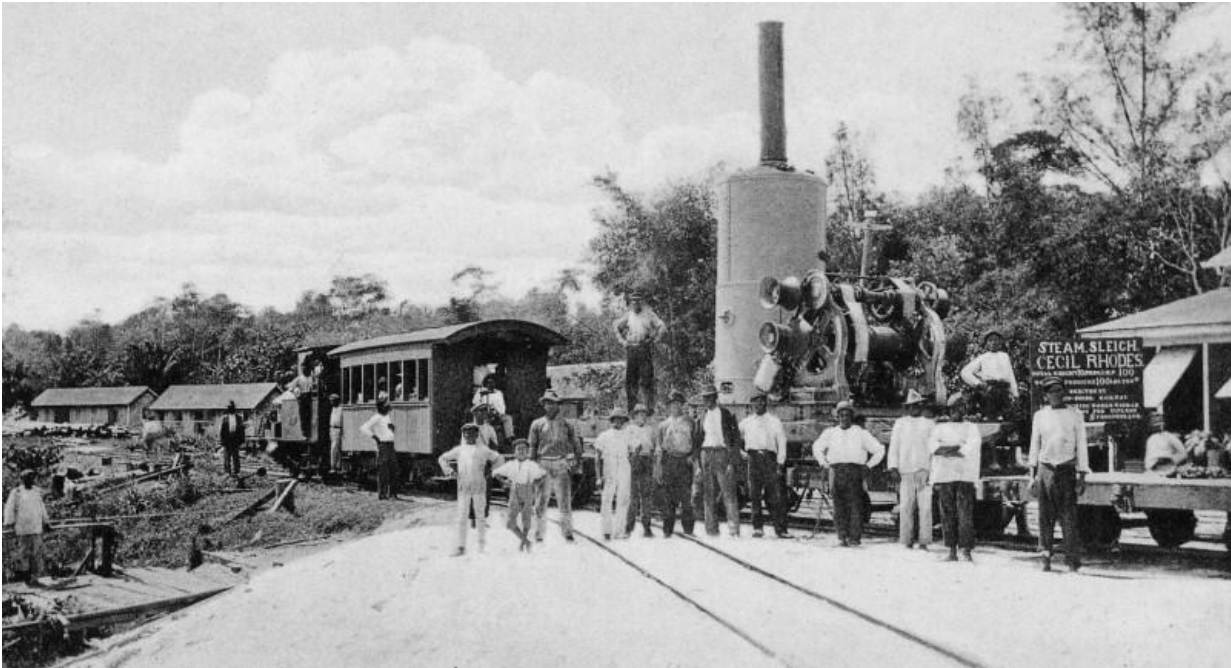
Nevertheless, Sproston persevered and on 26 October 1867 His Excellency Governor Hincks and his wife declared **Sprostons dry dock** open. It was christened by Mrs. Hincks as she loosed a silken cord to which a bottle of wine was attached against the iron gates at the opening ceremony with 1859 Steamer **Berbice** decked out in flags.

During the 1870s and 1880s Sproston did much to improve ferry services throughout Guyana. 1878 represents a watershed in the history of steamer operations in Guyana as Sprostons operated a daily ferry service to Essequibo.

On December 11, 1878, **The Sproston Creole**, the first steamer built by Sprostons' dry dock in Guiana, commenced operations. Other steamers such as **Amy** (1886), **Horatio** (1886), and the **New Amsterdam** (1887) bolstered ferry services in the country.

The areas navigated also increased. For example, in 1881 ferry services were extended from the Demerara River to Lucky Spot and along the Berbice River from New Amsterdam to Commacka.

Other steamers operated by Sprostons under exclusive contract from the government included **Eluza, Malali** and the launches **Gertie, Elfreda** and **Piranah**. Steamers were divided into two sections, first and second class. Tickets for First Class during the 1880s cost \$2.00, while the Second Class cost 48 cents.



Sprostons Steam Winch for hauling greenheart on the DER- Wismar 1910

In 1894, Sproston extended his interests to Christianburg, Upper Demerara, acquiring a portion of the Paterson's Lands, which had been bought by the Government. Sprostons Company LTD then constructed The Demerara Essequibo Railway in the years 1895 to 1897. A loan of \$200,000 dollars was given to Sprostons Company LTD by the British Government, to be repaid in twenty years without interest. This light Railway line was 18 and $\frac{3}{4}$ miles long and ran westward from the Wismar Terminus to the Rockstone Terminus. It provided access through Guyana's primeval forest to the upper Essequibo's Potaro gold fields, Balata (Bullet wood) trees and endless supply of hardwoods, with the first leg of the journey done by Demerara River Steamers from Georgetown.

Hugh Sprostons, born July 19, 1819 Gibraltar, died June 24, 1907 Beattyville, Lee Kentucky USA. He had three marriages, (1) Horatia, (2) Ann and (3) Marion Eliza Hill, was 87 years old, and Sprostons Company LTD continued with success after his death.

By 1914 Sprostons' fleet consisted of some 15 ships, traversing the interior. They were classified as Class A1 ships, all build at Lloyds in London.

The First World War proved to be very profitable for Sprostons as numerous ships were repaired at the dry dock. By 1923, however the company began a slow downward spiral. Its interests were purchased by the Aluminum Company Limited based in Montreal Canada.

One hypothesis for the decline of Sprostons may have been the establishment of the Transport and Harbors Department in 1919. The actions of the Harbor Board and the new regulations soon gave way to the government asserting control of the transportation network that it had contracted to Sprostons to operate. This was done under the guidance of the Colonial Steamer Services.

In 1922, the Colonial Steamer Service became the Government Steamer Service. It was later amalgamated with the Demerara Railway to form the Colonial Transportation Department and marked the end of that era of steamers in Guyana.

Bigger and better steamers continue to dominate British Guiana's landscape of the first half of the 1900s. The legendary **R.H Carr** ran the Georgetown to Upper Demerara route. The R.H. Carr was built in 1927 in Saltney, a small town in Wales on the river Dee just south of Liverpool in the UK. Under steam power she made her way across the Atlantic Ocean to British Guiana and was operated as steamship before being converted to diesel in the 1950s by the then owner Sprostons Ltd.



Tough and legendary ships and ferries such as the **Oranjestaad, Lady Northcote, Powis, Canje Pheasant, Pomeroun, Barima, Lady Berbice, Mazaruni, Makouria, Torani, Lukanani**, etc. connected the lives of Guyanese and transported cargo. The age of steamers have now been replaced by diesel and gas engines of our time but the stories of our rich heritage were carried by those steamers on the many waters' of Guyana.

The name of Guyana's national bird **The Canje Pheasant** was given to a 298 tons cargo/passenger steamship built by Sprostons in 1956 and highlighted *'in the news of 1958 that the people of British Guiana acclaimed Princess Margaret as the "Calypso Princess" when she arrived in Georgetown, the capital of this "Land of Waters", in a river steamer the Canje Pheasant. She had flown from Tobago. She landed at Atkinson Field, 25 miles from the city, soon after lunch. After a fanfare of trumpets she was greeted by the Governor, Sir Patrick Renison.*



The steamer Canje Pheasant, shortly after its launching.
British Guiana Handbook, H.M.S.O. 1956.
John S Sargent.

Leading personalities of the colony presented to Her Highness included the Archbishop of the West Indies, Dr. A. J. Knight, Dr. Cheddi Jagan, Minister of Trade and Commerce, and his wife Janet, the Minister of Labor, Health and housing.’ Such royalty and national symbolism attached to one of the last steamers that ploughed the waters of Guyana.

Quicker road travel across Guyana augmented with bridges of today have influenced the decline of ferries or river travel like the 1968 Linden/Soesdyke Highway, the 1978 Demerara Harbor Bridge and the 2008 Berbice Bridge. And so have disappeared over the horizon, that regal age of the Steamers of Guyana, what some of us might have experienced also and what our foreparents spoke so fondly of.