

OBITUARY

SIR ALEXANDER GIBB, G.B.E., C.B., LL.D., F.R.S., who was born at Broughty Ferry, Scotland, on 12 February, 1872, died at his home in Hartley Wintney on 21 January, 1958.

He was educated at the Abbey School, Beckenham, and at Rugby; he went on to study engineering for a year at University College, London. In 1891 he became a pupil of Sir John Wolfe Barry and Henry Marc Brunel (a son of Isambard Kingdom Brunel) in Westminster, and when his 5 years as a pupil was up he remained on the firm's engineering staff till 1900.

Towards the end of his pupilage he was an Assistant Engineer to Sir John Wolfe Barry on the East Dock, Barry, designing among other things the tip viaducts and sidings there, and he was also employed on the construction of the Deep Lock, 1894-1896. Then as a Resident Engineer for the firm he worked on railway widenings and extensions, including the Great Central extension to the station at Finchley Road and the Metropolitan underground extension between Whitechapel and Bow.

In 1900 he joined his father's firm, Easton Gibb & Son, who were then constructing the King Edward VII Bridge at Kew, and for the next 16 years he was engaged in contracting, first as Engineering Director of that firm and subsequently as Chairman of the new firm which he formed of Easton Gibb & Son Ltd.

Of the considerable works with which he was connected as a contractor, three of the most important were the £1,250,000 extensions at Alexandra Dock, Newport, most of the anti-submarine defences for Scotland, and the 1909-1916 construction of the Naval Base at Rosyth. It was largely because of his acceleration scheme for the latter that it was finished in time to dock the ships damaged in the Battle of Jutland.

In 1916 he accepted a new appointment under Sir Eric Geddes as Chief Engineer, Ports Construction, to the British Armies in France and Belgium. A year later he became Deputy Director of Docks (O) for the British Expeditionary Force in France.

In addition to his administrative and advisory duties in these capacities he prepared special landing facilities at Dieppe, Calais, and Dunkirk for cross-Channel train ferries, he was responsible for the water supply for Belgium, and he was in charge of the reconstruction of the ports and railway junctions demolished by the Germans, to be ready for the Allies' planned spring offensive in 1917. This attack did not take place and so the main job of Ports Construction—repairs in the Belgian harbours—was not carried out. Instead Gibb had to prepare a scheme for the destruction of the French ports from Dunkirk to Le Havre in the event of a German break-through after their offensive in the spring of 1918. Fortunately the scheme proved unnecessary. The Belgian ports were repaired and put in order by him in 1919, although the damage was not great enough to warrant the use of the original reconstruction scheme.

Some of these duties overlapped with those of his next appointment, for in 1918 he was made Civil-Engineer-in-Chief, Admiralty, and put in charge of all

naval civil engineering works at home and abroad; one of these works was the construction of the naval docks at Pembroke.

At this tail-end of the war he was also concerned with a scheme he had proposed earlier—the “Mystery Towers” or artificial islands to be established across the Channel Straits to combat the U-boat menace. Before this could be put into operation, the Armistice was declared, but it was applied to anti-aircraft defence in the Thames Estuary and elsewhere during the Second World War.

Created K.B.E. upon his appointment to the Admiralty, Sir Alexander was raised to G.B.E. in 1920. He was granted a C.B. in 1918 for his work in France, and he held the rank of Brigadier-General (retired) in the Royal Marines, and Colonel (retired) in the Royal Engineers.

In 1919 Sir Alexander was made Director-General of Civil Engineering, Ministry of Transport—a new department in a new Ministry where he supervised the engineering for all types of communication in Great Britain. The Channel Tunnel scheme came under his review there; he reported on the Severn Barrage and advised on Swansea Docks.

During the next few years he served on a number of committees. He was Chairman of the Technical Committee on London Traffic, a member of the Electrification of Railways Advisory Committee, and a Chairman of the Light Railways Investigation Committee. He acted for the Government immediately after the war, giving evidence before the Colwyn Committee, which was determining the compensation to be paid by the Government to the railway companies. He also advised on engineering problems in connexion with the South Wales Docks and was appointed technical adviser to the Treasury on civil engineering schemes financed under the Trades Facilities Act. In addition he was Ministry of Transport Representative on the Forth Conservancy Board.

In 1921 Sir Alexander set up as a consulting engineer and a year later initiated his own firm, Sir Alexander Gibb and Partners, with himself as senior partner.

He was one of the first to recognize the importance of hydro-electric development in Britain and much of his early work was done jointly with Dr Merz and Colonel McLellan, the consulting electrical engineers. With them he was responsible for the 535-MW Barking Power Station, the Humber River hydro-electric scheme in Newfoundland, and, in 1926–1929, the 103-MW Galloway hydro-electric scheme. These early years also saw an investigation into the foundations of St Paul's Cathedral (Sir Alexander was joint Consulting Engineer to the Dean and Chapter of St Paul's) and the building of the Aquarium in the London Zoological Gardens.

Sir Alexander advised in his lifetime the governments of at least seventeen countries. These included Canada for the administration¹ and development of the Canadian National Ports, New Zealand for the Arapuni hydro-electric station, Australia for the Captain Cook Graving Dock at Sydney, 1941–1945, Burma for the Port of Rangoon, Venezuela for the La Guaira Harbour extension, and Colombia for the sea walls at the mouth of the Magdalena River and the new port at Barranquilla. He also arranged the purchase, manning, and despatch of two destroyers built in Portugal to British designs. This was Colombia's Navy. Sir Alexander advised on various works for the governments of Persia, India, and Turkey as well, and he was Consulting Engineer to the Admiralty for certain aspects of the Singapore Naval Base.

¹ The references are on p. 133.

In Britain he was employed by the Ministry of Transport on the reconstruction of Telford's Menai Bridge and was Engineer for the Kincardine road bridge opened in 1936; he was also a joint Consulting Engineer to the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board.

As a consequence of his activities abroad, during the First World War and after, Sir Alexander held a number of foreign decorations. He was a Commander of the Order of the Crown of Belgium, a Grand Officer of the Order of Boyaca (Colombia), and he belonged to the Grand Cross Order of the Three Stars (1st Class), Latvia. In addition to these he held the King's Silver Jubilee Medal, 1935, and the Distinguished Service Medal (American Navy). He was made a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1936.

Between the years 1933–1938 Sir Alexander's firm were concerned with industrial work such as the Guinness Brewery at Park Royal, London, and later with extensive schemes for the establishment of industries in the special areas of the north-east of England and in South Wales. They were required to lay out factory sites and to develop trading estates, and were involved in all aspects of industrial planning.

Sir Alexander's policy in these works was to create teams of the necessary specialists for each new project. This policy stood the firm in good stead during the 1939–1945 war when Sir Alexander's organization was called upon for the many types of constructional work appurtenant to the great national war effort, particularly ordnance and other factories.

Although Sir Alexander wrote a number of technical articles, made two B.B.C. broadcasts, and was the Author of a book on Telford,² the majority of his published works were Presidential Addresses or Papers delivered to the numerous professional organizations to which he belonged.

A full description of his career is given in a book³ by Harrison, published in 1950.

Twice President of the Institution of Chemical Engineers,^{4, 5} four times President of the Institution of Engineers-in-Charge, he had also been a President of the Institute of Transport,^{6, 7} the Junior Institution of Engineers,⁸ the Institute of Welding (three times^{9–11}), the London Chamber of Commerce (for 3 years), and Section G (Engineering) of the British Association for the Advancement of Science.¹² He was a Past-Chairman of the Association of Consulting Engineers.

He was a member of the College Committee and a Vice-Chairman of the Managing Sub-Committee of University College, London, and he was Chairman of Council of College Hall, University of London, and later their Hon. President.

He was a full Member of the American Society of Civil Engineers, the Société des Ingénieurs Civils de France, the Royal Institution of Great Britain, the Association of Scientific and Technical Institutions, the British Science Guild, and the Freshwater Biological Association for the British Empire. He was an Associate of the Institution of Naval Architects and an Honorary Member of the Engineering Institute of Canada. He was a past-Member of the Royal Fine Arts Commission (the first civil engineer to have been appointed) and of the Board of Referees appointed under the Finance Acts.

Sir Alexander had been a member of the British National Committee on Large Dams World Power Conference and of the Consultative Committee on Engineering. He was on the Education Committee of the London County Council and a member of the Council and Executive Committee of Princess Helena College.

The title of Doctor of Laws was conferred on him by Edinburgh University, and he was a Fellow of University College, London, as well as belonging to its Old Students' Association. He was a Fellow of the Royal Meteorological Society, the Zoological Society, the Geological Society, the Permanent Way Institution, the Royal Geographical Society, and the Institute of Fuel. He was an Honorary Associate of the College of Technology, Manchester, and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries (Scotland).

A past-chief of the London Ross and Cromarty and Sutherland Association, he was a Past-President of the Old Rugbeian Society, the Burns Federation, and the London Fife Association. He was a Vice-President of the Kipling Society. Sir Alexander was also a member of the Queen's Bodyguard for Scotland (Royal Company of Archers).

Elected an Associate Member in 1897, Sir Alexander was transferred to the class of Members in 1917.

He became a Member of Council in 1925 and Vice-President in 1932. He took office as President¹³ in 1936.

In 1900 he married Norah Isobel Monteith, who died in 1940. There were three sons of the marriage, the eldest being killed playing polo in 1955. He is therefore survived by two sons.

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