

The *Conway* Paintings of Gordon Ellis (1921-79) v5 updated 28th January 2021

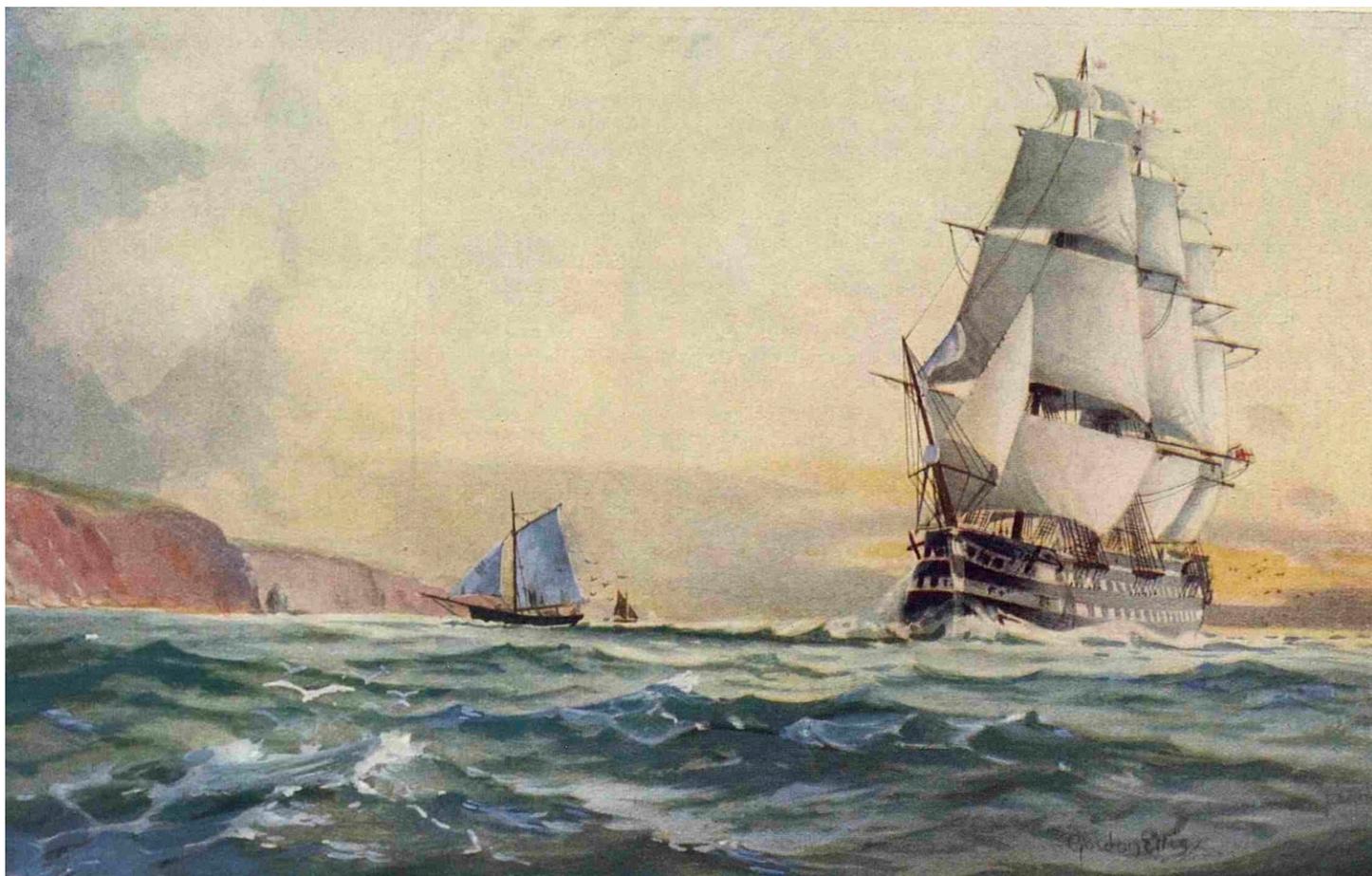
OCs know Ellis best known for his large painting of the ship hanging on our old quarterdeck in the New Block at Plas Newydd which featured on the cover of the January 2018 *The Cadet*. He was a prolific marine artist, normally painting in oils on board, producing hundreds of oil paintings including at least 15 of *Conway*. Four show her under sail as *Nile*, and as *Conway* there are eight at Rock Ferry (two of her leaving in 1941), two at Bangor and one of her at Plas Newydd.

Very little is written about him, because most of his sales were to private collectors in Liverpool and the USA. With nothing on public display and few rarely coming up for sale he receives little national exposure. There is a good article about him in A S Davidson's book "Marine Art & Liverpool".

HMS *Nile* Under Sail

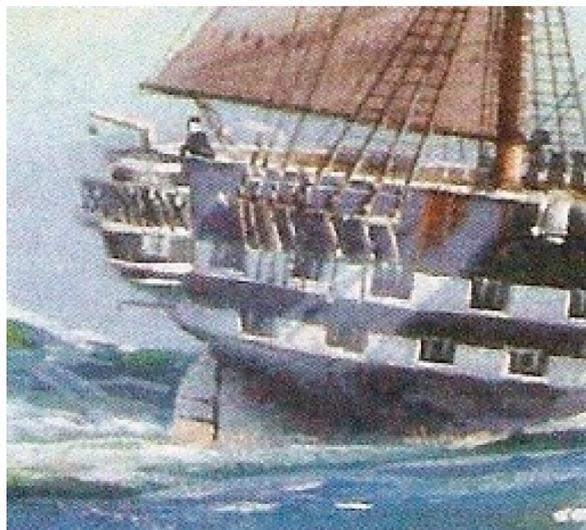
Ellis is known to have painted three paintings of *Conway* as HMS *Nile* at sea and under sail.

His first image, "*HMS Nile*" (below), was published in *The Tatler* magazine on 13th Dec 1939. It shows her under sail and viewed from her port bow.





His second painting of HMS *Nile* (above) is also titled “*HMS Nile*” and was produced in 1945. The hull is shown relatively close up compared to many of his Rock Ferry paintings below but her hull is somewhat distorted. Her length seems stretched (more like a tea clipper’s) and the height between her gun decks is compressed, creating problems with the position of the stern walk and the size of the figure on the poop as shown below. That size individual would have had to crawl on hands and knees in the deck heights shown. There appear to be stern davits which was not the case. The figurehead is omitted, presumably because he was not sure what the original looked like. The shape of the forward Upper Deck is wrong as the raised foredeck was only added in 1939. Nevertheless it is a splendid image. He shows her much better in his third and fourth images of *Nile* overleaf.





“*Nile Proceeding Under Sail Down The Channel*” (above) used to hang in Captain Hewitt’s New Block office. The image below was provided by the son of Godfrey Palmer (42-44). The sails are the same on both, just reversed, even the waves and spray are almost identical!



Conway Moored At Rock Ferry



The above painting, “HMS Conway”, was specially commissioned for the New Block in 1964 by the wife of Mr O’Brien Harding, Vice Chairman of Conway’s Board of Governors. It hangs there still. It measures approximately 15’ by 11’ so Ellis painted it in a barn and erected scaffolding to enable him to paint the top parts. He is shown below right in front of the painting. He has used one of his most favoured compositions for dramatic effect; the main subject is centre stage, the Liver Building is dominant in the background and other vessels, especially tugs and ferries, are scattered around. He used this basic structure in many of his Mersey paintings and at least three other Conway paintings (see below). In this case Conway is shown with her rigging when launched in 1839. The Autumn rising sun and clouds draw the eye to the ship, the sun here indicating the new dawn at Plas Newydd. The ship is depicted in a very busy waterway. In the January 1968 *The Cadet* (page 10), Mr O’Brien explained the composition as follows “Golden yellow sky, the dawn we hope of a new era. Two Rea tugs. Wallasey Road Transport Ferry Leasowe. Isle of Man Steam Packet Victoria. Wallasey passenger ferry John Joyce. A Weaver flat (Ed: salt barge). Tug Alexandra. Birkenhead passenger ferry. Union flag on jack staff, MMSA flag at main truck, defaced blue ensign on spanker gaff halyards. Signal ‘Quit Ye Like Men Be Strong’ on fore and main spencer gaff halyards. Underneath an extract from the preamble to the Navigation & Naval Discipline Acts of 1660: ‘it is upon ship and sailor, under the good providence of God, that our wealth, safety and strength chiefly depend’.”

The image is not without its issues. The ship was never actually moored where shown. The bowsprit is completely misplaced and has no supporting pillow. The ship has 1839 rigging, yet the 10 oared cutters shown were post 1925, she has her 1938 figurehead and the pinnace did not arrive until 1946. However it is splendid painting.



Conway In The Sloyne At Rock Ferry

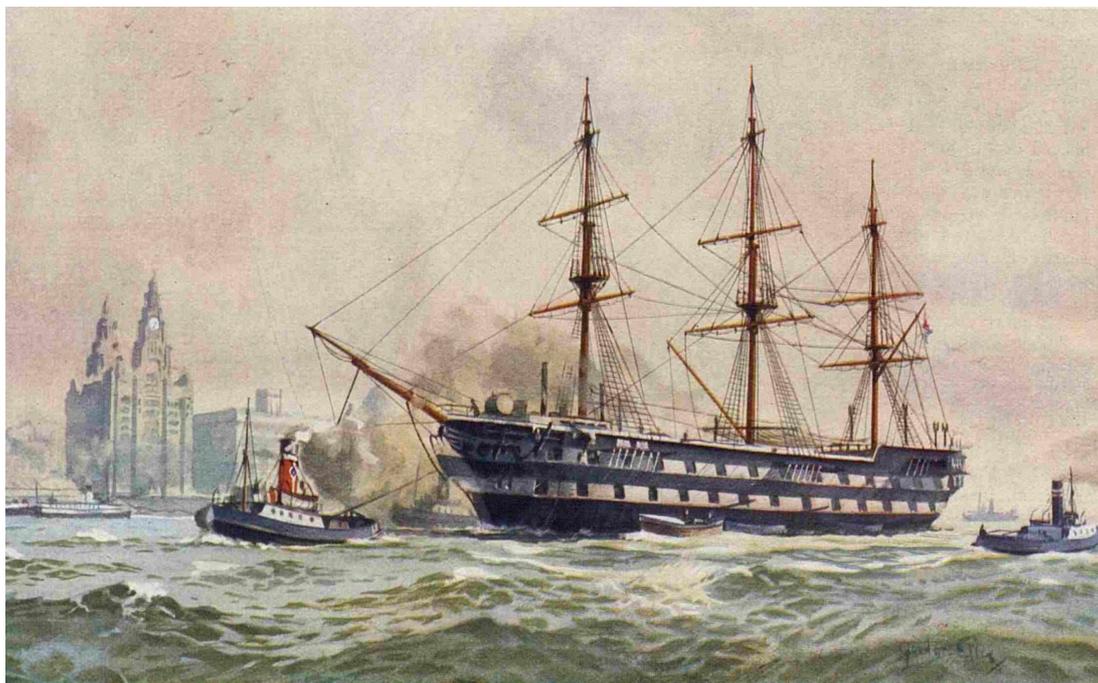
The painting below is the only known one of the ship actually moored in The Sloyne. The tanks and chimneys in front of the foremast, and the lack of a figurehead date this scene to between 1918 and 1937. The ship is stemming an ebb tide and is viewed from midway along the promenade from Rock Ferry to New Ferry. From the position of the sun it is early evening and a ferry from Rock Ferry to Liverpool is in the distance.



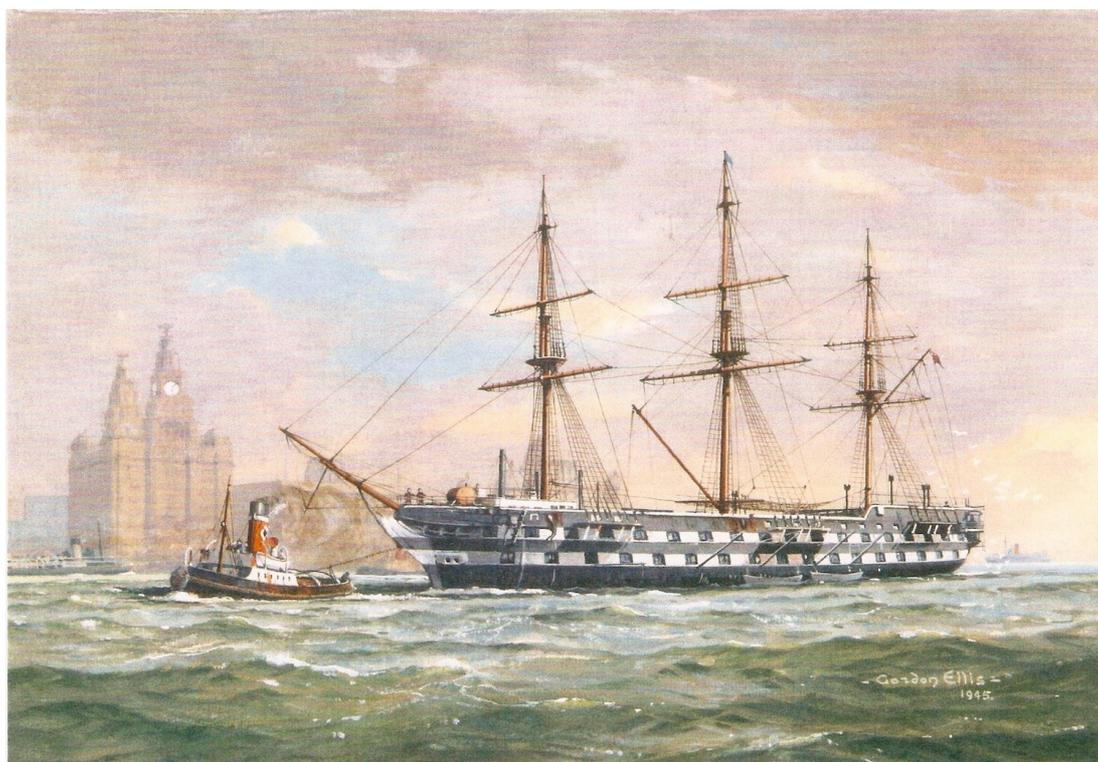
Conway Under Tow, Rock Ferry 29th July 1937

On 29 July 1937 the ship was towed to Vittoria Dock for her first refit since 1904. The work included repairing damage to the main deck beams and the deck sheathing caused by heat from the cooking range, improving the galley and the heating system, and replacing aged planking between the waterline and the gun ports. 550 square feet of planking was replaced using English oak and extensive re-caulking was completed. The main timbers exposed were found to be in excellent condition.

His first painting of the ship on this transit was published in The Tatler magazine on 13th Dec 1939. It is titled "*The Conway Being Towed Downriver For Overhaul*" and is reproduced below. He painted this scene again in 1945, see next page. Apart from the obvious differences of colouration and the angle of view, can you Spot The Differences? There are at least 24, answers at the end of this feature.



A second painting of the 1937 transit paintings is reproduced below. Painted in 1945, the title is believed to have been "*Conway Proceeding To Refit in 1937*". The composition is very similar to the New Block's "*HMS Conway*" on the first page although in this version there is only one tug. The Cunard Building is just an amorphous mass. This painting is also believed to have hung in Captain Hewitt's office.



His third painting of this transit is called "*HMS Conway Proceeding To Birkenhead, July 29 1937*" (50.8cm x 76cm) and shows her under tow viewed from the Liverpool bank opposite Rock Ferry and with the Wirral in the background. A ferry for Rock Ferry is manoeuvring to avoid her. She is towed by two Rea tugs although the stern tug is incorrectly shown as bows on to the ship.



His fourth painting of this transit is called "*HMS Conway Prior to Docking At Birkenhead 29 July 1937*" (40.64 cm x 58.42 cm.). Given the title the ship is presumably shown further downriver than in the above painting although the composition is very similar; with just the positions of the ferry and foreground tug reversed. His treatment of the light and water is markedly different in all his paintings. In the painting centre right above the light is very bright so everything is in sharp focus. The other two on this page depict a much duller and more overcast day.



Conway Leaves Rock Ferry 1941

The ship left Rock Ferry for Bangor at 3pm on 21st May 1941. As always when underway she is controlled by two Rea tugs, one forward and one aft, in this case the *Langworth* and *Dongarth*. Both images above show her leaving the Mersey and use his favoured composition with the Liver Building in the background. The painting above right, title not known, was produced in 1941. He has used an old photo of the ship as by 1941 the figurehead had been masted and the tall thin fore deck chimney had been removed and the whole upper deck area around the foremast had been built up and covered over creating the new fore deck. Above left is "*The Old Conway*" (54.5cm x 80.5cm) painted in 1945 and here the fore part of the ship is accurately portrayed with the new figurehead in place.



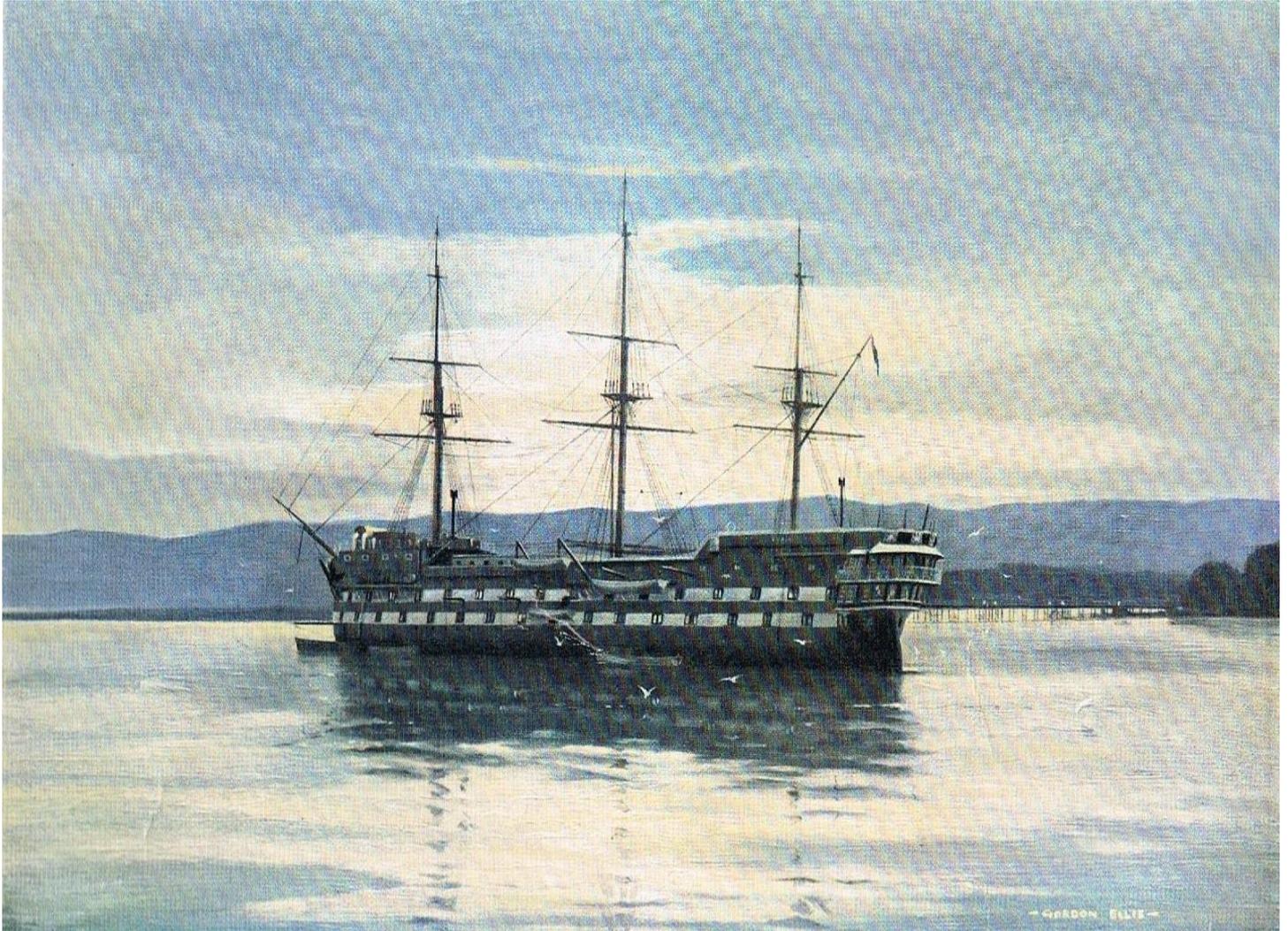
Conway At Glyn Garth, Bangor 1941-49

At least two paintings show the ship at her Glyn Garth moorings off Bangor Pier. In both these paintings Ellis's demonstrates some of his typical composition elements; a second vessel by/towards her stern, and smaller vessels shown in the distance under her bow.

In the first of these below, the high steep hillsides and houses on the shore under her bow confirm these as Bangor scenes. They show her with her bows towards the suspension bridge, i.e. in a flood tide that has passed up the strait from Caernarfon, or an ebb tide. This uncertainty provides a clue to the cause of the loss of the ship in April 1953. The residual flood arriving from Caernarfon when viewed from the Bangor shore (as here) gives the impression that the tide is ebbing when in fact it is actually flooding. Once the flood has passed right around Anglesey and starts to pour into the strait at Puffin Island the residual flood from Caernarfon is gradually stemmed.



The image below, HMS *Conway*, is his only painting known to depict a stern view of the ship. The sun is rising over the mountains so it shows the ship early in the morning with her bows towards Puffin Island, Snowdonia in the background, and Bangor Pier is visible under her stern. Here too the state of the tide is uncertain, it could be a flood tide entering the strait between Puffin Island and the Great Orme, or an ebb tide draining out through the Swellies!



Conway At Plas Newydd

Only one painting of the ship at Plas Newydd after 1949 is known, unless you know differently.....

This image shows the long, low and level hillside stretching all the way from Plas Newydd to the Tubular Bridge, very different to the higher undulating ridge at Glyn Garth. The House is hidden behind her hull



*If you have any better quality images or new Ellis Conway paintings please email me
alfie@hmsconway.org*

Spot The Difference (1945 painting compared to the 1939 painting)

1. Only one vessel at the pierhead. 2. Pierhead vessel has yellow funnel. 3. Liver Birds shown. 4. Liver Building corner towers shown differently. 5. Cunard Building lacks clarity. 6. Tug is not making dark smoke. 7. Tug has six portholes. 8. Tug stern properly represented. 9. No second tug "under" ship's bows. 10. Two people on the Fore Deck. 11. One topping lift per yard not two on all yards. 12. Motor boat under power between Fore and Mizzen not shown. 13. No of gun ports on both decks. 14. Four boat davits not two. 15. Two boats from davits spaced differently. 16. Second tug heading upriver in the right foreground. 17. Main mizzen shrouds shown differently. 18. Mizzen gaff rigging. 19. Foreground water much calmer. 20. Seagulls over the Liver Building. 21. Sky is more broken with blue showing. 22. The third Grace is missing – Port Of Liverpool Building missing. 23. Different rigging between bowsprit and forepeak different. 24. Different deadeye rigging on all three masts.