



## Jules Verne and the Heroes of Birkenhead.

### Part 30.

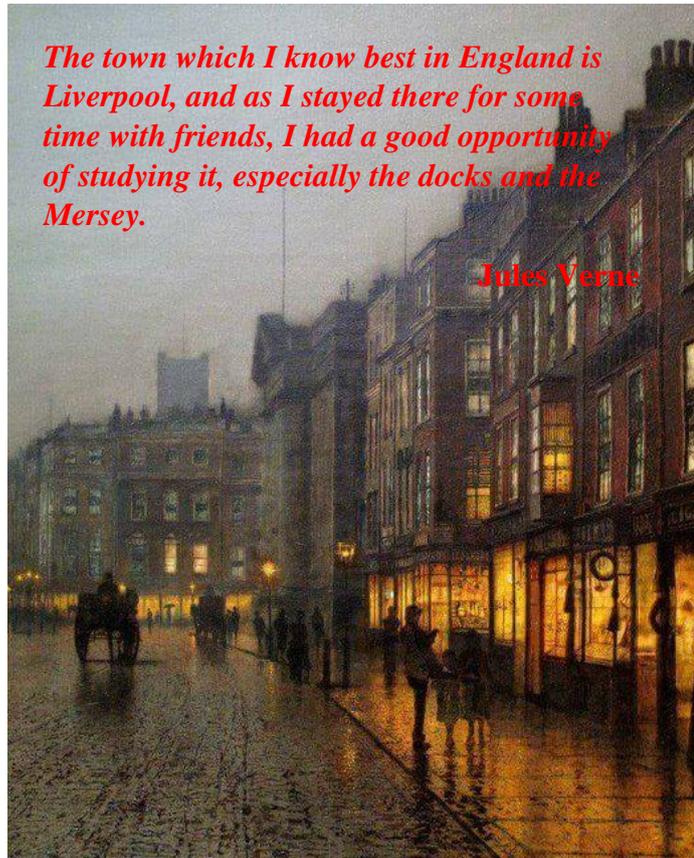
Who were the Birkenhead 'Friends' of Jules Verne?

By John Lamb

(Former Head of Geography, The Liverpool Blue Coat School, England).

*The town which I know best in England is Liverpool, and as I stayed there for some time with friends, I had a good opportunity of studying it, especially the docks and the Mersey.*

Jules Verne



Liverpool in 1875

UBI FIDES IBI LUX ET ROBUR



## Part 30.

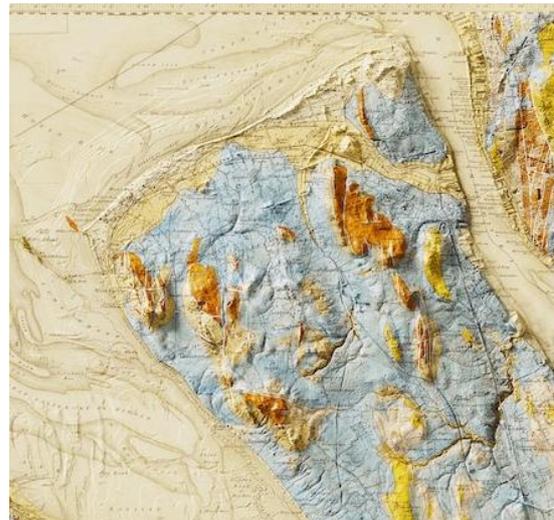
### Who were the ‘Birkenhead Friends’ of Jules Verne?

Jules Verne’s knowledge of the physical geography and history of Birkenhead and the Wirral Peninsula is nothing short of astonishing.

It is almost as if he requested every history book, every geography book, every geology book, journal, map, newspaper and pamphlet about the Wirral Peninsula to be placed on a very large table.

Verne must have then spent months sorting out the best material and used his artistic genius to weave together his storylines for *The Mysterious Island*.

#### The Physical Landscape of the Wirral Peninsula.



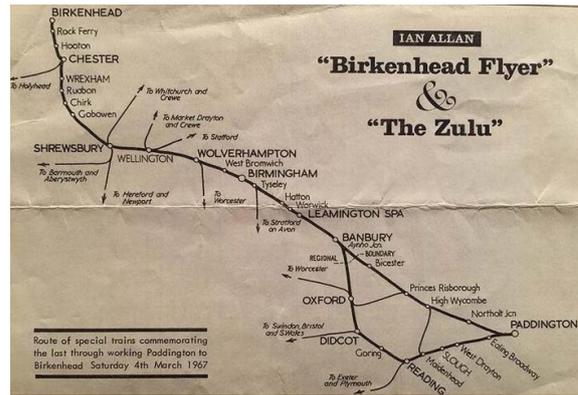
Verne must have ‘walked the field’ throughout the peninsula, most likely in the company of his illustrator Jules Ferat – whose sketches of Wirral’s local landmarks provide further visual clues to our adventure.

#### Richmond Virginia and Birkenhead Woodside Ferry Terminal.

And yet how did Verne and his ‘team’ get to Birkenhead so easily, so often and so unnoticed?

One explanation is that from 1860 until 1967 there were five trains a day running directly from Paddington Station in London directly to Birkenhead, Woodside Station. It would have been very easy for Jules Verne to travel from London to Birkenhead, in around six hours. He is known to have travelled under assumed names.

**The “Birkenhead Flyer.”**



Verne’s love of yachting (he owned three progressively larger yachts over the course of his lifetime) may also have given him some seasonal ‘access’ to Birkenhead and facilitate meetings on his own and other people’s yachts.

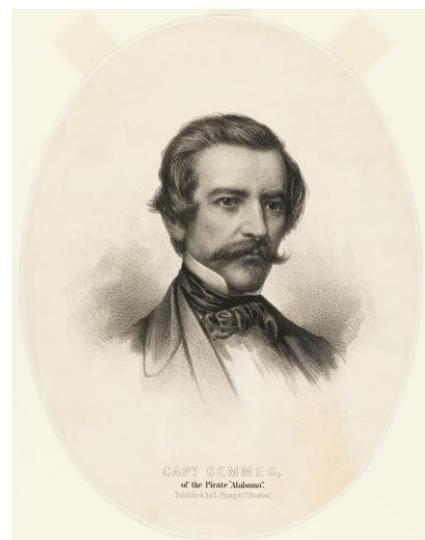
**Jules Verne’s Third Yacht – The *St Michelle III* (c 1877).**

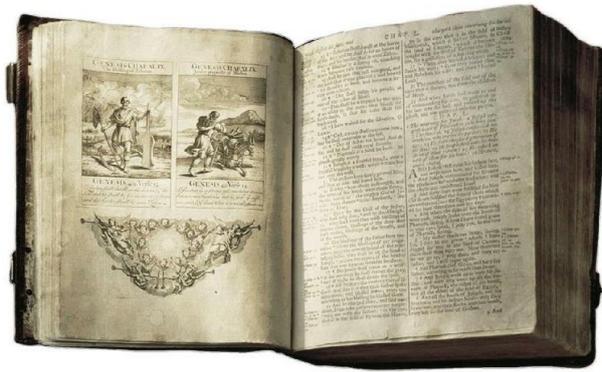
*I have yachted for my pleasure, but always with an eye to getting information for my books.*

**Jules Verne.**

As we shall see, Jules Verne’s possible list of ‘friends’ will stretch much further than a Confederate Admiral from Mobile, Alabama. And yet what possessed Jules Verne to cooperate with the most infamous pirate in the world and use his memoirs as the template for his classic novel *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*?

Jules Verne must have been given reassurance at the very highest level that his all too obvious cooperation with Raphael Semmes would be for an ‘overall good.’ that would easily override any criticism of cooperating with a seemingly unrepentant pro slavery Confederate ‘pirate’.





That ‘overall good’ would involve foremost a love of God and the belief in the forgiveness of Christian sin whereby one says sorry for those sins committed in the past and does one’s best to make up for it in the future.

It is then up to fellow Christians and others to decide whether they should forgive. This is just as much a personal decision for all of us today as it would have been 150 years ago and perhaps the story of Raphael Semmes and his apparent attempts to atone for his sins will reveal more about our own ability to forgive in the modern world, than we would care to admit.

We now turn back to the Liverpool and Birkenhead ‘friends’ that Jules Verne referred to in the interview he gave in 1894.

*The town which I know best in England is Liverpool, and as I stayed there for some time with friends, I had a good opportunity of studying it, especially the docks and the Mersey.*

***Jules Verne at Home (1894).***

Verne, of course, does not mention any specific names, but it is almost certain that given Jules Verne’s passion for yachting, at least some of those ‘friends’ came from the following list, particularly those members of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.

The list is concise and without adornment, this is because it is important to appreciate the sheer density of Verne’s possible ‘sponsors’ in Birkenhead before we once again climb aboard Captain Nemo’s *Nautilus* and travel *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.

## **Members of The Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.**

### **Queen Victoria – Patron of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.**

From 1844 to 1901, Queen Victoria was the long-standing Patron of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead. In 1886 Queen Victoria visited the River Mersey on the Birkenhead ferry boat *Claughton* with Royal Mersey Yacht Club member Thomas Ismay at her side. Any patronage by Queen Victoria would not only give Verne artistic protection but also encourage his artistic license. The fifth novel will suggest such a common patronage at the very highest level.

### **Edward Prince of Wales – Later King Edward VII - Honorary Member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.**

An Honorary Member and later Patron of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead, who had paid a highly successful diplomatic visit to the United States in 1860. 'Tell' - the father of his pet dog 'Hope' plays the role of Top in Jules Verne's *Mysterious Island*.

### **Emperor Napoleon III of France – Honorary Member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.**

Nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte who sponsored the Paris Exposition of 1867 and the conversion of the *Great Eastern* back into a passenger liner by Lairds shipyard of Tranmere, Birkenhead. Jules Verne sailed aboard the *Great Eastern* from Birkenhead to New York as guest of honour in March 1867, also aboard was Cyrus Field. Napoleon III was a friend of the Stanley family at Hooton Hall, Wirral and hunted around Claughton, Birkenhead in the 1840's. Napoleon III's last act before being deposed as Emperor of France in 1870, was to award the Legion d'honneur to Jules Verne.

**F.A. Stanley, 16<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby – Commodore of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.**

Son of the British Prime Minister at the time of both of Jules Verne's documented visits to Birkenhead in 1859 and 1867. Commodore of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club at the time of the writing of *Mysterious Island*. Family history of sponsoring writers from William Shakespeare to Edward Lear.

F.A. Stanley's father the 15<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby while serving his third term as Prime Minister gave the first conciliatory speech on the resolution of 'Alabama Claims' at the Mansion House on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1866, this was seen as a 'significant intimation' by Ambassador Charles Francis Adams in a letter to William Seward dated 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1866 (Department of State, United States of America).

The Derby family have major links to the American individuals yet to enter our story and connecting well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Successive Earls of Derby were commodores of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead for the whole of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Cornelius Vanderbilt – Honorary Life Member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.**

Railway magnate, richest man on earth, donated his ship the USS *Vanderbilt* to Abraham Lincoln in order to catch the Birkenhead built CSS *Alabama*. Cornelius Vanderbilt was also the main guarantor of Confederate President Jefferson Davis's \$100,000 bail money after the American Civil War.

**William Kissemer Vanderbilt – Honorary Life Member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.**

Grandson of Cornelius Vanderbilt, he managed his family's railroad investments. Enrolled as a member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead by Thomas Ismay. Commissioned the yachts *Alva* and *Valiant* from club member St Clare John Byrne, the latter being built at Lairds shipyard of Tranmere, Birkenhead and at 2,184 tonnes, the largest private yacht in the world. A member until his death in 1920. His daughter Consuela will briefly enter our story.

**Frederick William Vanderbilt – Honorary Life Member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.**

The second grandson of Cornelius Vanderbilt, next door neighbour to one of the major American contributors to our story. Enrolled in the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead by existing member Thomas Ismay. A member until his death in 1938. In Jules Verne's 1895 novel, *The Floating Island*, the town of Milliard, (in reality Birkenhead) is described as a 'Vanderbiltian City'.

**Thomas Ismay – Member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.**

The founder and President of the White Star Line until 1899, Thomas Ismay had strong connections to the Vanderbilts and one other notable American family. He lived at ‘Dawpool’ Thurstaston, on the Wirral Peninsula, just seven miles from Birkenhead. His son Bruce Ismay was also a member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead and as president of the White Star Line he commissioned the ill-fated White Star Liner *Titanic*.

**John Laird – Member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.**

Builder of both the historic CSS *Alabama* and the fictional Captain Nemo’s *Nautilus*. Conservative Member of Parliament for Birkenhead between 1861 and 1874 serving under Conservative Prime Ministers Lord Derby and Benjamin Disraeli. Friend of Matthew Fontaine Maury and dined with Captain Raphael Semmes, two days after the sinking of the CSS *Alabama*.

**Francis Tremlett – Member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.**

Confederate spy and supposed guardian until 1868 of Raphael Semmes’s memoirs that would become the inspirational template for Jules Verne’s novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. Entertained ex-Confederate President Jefferson Davis, General Robert E Lee and Matthew Fontaine Maury at his parsonage in London after the American Civil War. Officiated at the wedding of Jefferson Davis’s sister-in-law.

**Charles Prioleau – Member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.**

As Senior Partner at the Confederate Bank of Fraser, Trenhom and Company Prioleau financed the construction of the CSS *Alabama* – the inspiration for Captain Nemo’s *Nautilus*. He was based at the Confederate headquarters at Nautilus House, Rumford Place, Liverpool. Prioleau also donated a cannon to the City of Charleston which is said to have fired the first shots of the American Civil War.

**John Lancaster – Member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.**

Captain of the *Deerhound* who saved Raphael Semmes (Captain Nemo) after the sinking of the CSS *Alabama* at Cherbourg on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1864 – later became the Liberal Member of Parliament for Wigan under Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone. Gladstone’s family at Hawarden, North Wales, were prominent members of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.

**McGregor Laird – Member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.**

Prominent abolitionist and champion of American emancipation after the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire in 1833. Brother of John Laird, the man who built the CSS *Alabama* and Captain Nemo's *Nautilus*. Died in 1861. Briefly mentioned in the Jules Verne Book *The Great Explorers of the Nineteenth Century* (1881). Championed the British Empire's role in ending slavery worldwide.

**Thomas Brassey – Member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.**

Birkenhead railway magnate and engineer who built over three quarters of France's railways and one twentieth of the world's railways in the nineteenth century. He helped finance the construction of Brunel's *Great Eastern* and purchased the vessel in 1864 and was mainly responsible for its conversion into a transatlantic cable layer. Played Cyrus Harding in Jules Verne's *Mysterious Island*. Brassey's A41 'New Chester Road' features as the *straight road to Port Balloon* in *Mysterious Island*. Given the Legion d'honneur by Napoleon III in 1856 for helping France in the Crimean War. Business partner of Transatlantic cable entrepreneur Cyrus Field. Praised by Jules Verne in his novel *Backwards to Britain* (1859).

**Holbrooke Gaskell – Member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.**

A cousin of the abolitionist novelist Elizabeth Gaskell who was a friend of both Charles Dickens and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Elizabeth Gaskell's name (slightly altered) is carved on the inner wall of Dakkar's (Captain Nemo's) Grotto on Hilbre Island. Elizabeth Gaskell is the major link to our fifth novel also set in Birkenhead and starring Raphael Semmes in five roles, one more than his acting contribution in *Mysterious Island*.

Elizabeth Gaskell had her own connections with the transatlantic cable and the Semmes codeword 'cable' will lead us to our fifth novel.

**Charles Judkins – Member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.**

Captain of the *Scotia*, the Cunard ship that in fiction, at least, was the first major ship to be struck by Captain Nemo's *Nautilus* in the novel *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. The *Scotia* was later converted to a cable layer at Laird's shipyard of Tranmere, Birkenhead.

As Captain of the *Cambria*, the ship that carried Frederick Douglass to his freedom in Liverpool, it was Charles Judkins who defended Frederick Douglass's right to speak about the evils of slavery with his own fists. Judkins and the *Scotia* will provide a major link to one prominent American family in our story.

## Other Prominent Figures.

**Gordon Bennett of the New York Herald** – played Gideon Spilett of the *New York Herald* in Jules Verne's *Mysterious Island* and commissioned Jules Verne's 1889 novel *In the Year 2,889*. Bennett was drawn by the artist *Nemo* in his own magazine *Vanity Fair*.

Eccentric lunatic whose name is now a byword for incredulity in the English Language. Not a member of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club but commissioned his yacht *Namouna* from club member St Clare John Byrne. Personally enrolled in the U.S. Navy by Abraham Lincoln and donated his yacht *Henrietta* to Abraham Lincoln in the American Civil War.

Bennett was a personal guest of Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh and attended a Royal Mersey Yacht Club ball after winning the first yacht race across the Atlantic in *Henrietta* in 1866. Jules Verne pays tribute to Bennett in his 1875 novel *Around the World in Eighty Days* whereby Phileas Fogg makes his final journey across the Atlantic aboard the *Henrietta*.

### **P T Barnum (The Greatest Showman).**

Phileas Taylor Barnum of Barnum and Bailey's Circus was a frequent visitor to Liverpool. He claimed Birkenhead shipbuilder John Laird 'of Alabama fame' had written to him offering to buy back the elephant Jumbo for the British people. In his autobiography he writes how Captain Charles Judkins once threatened to put him in irons on board a Cunard ship for daring to ask for his own religious service above the captain's. Barnum appears in several Verne novels, most notably as Calistus Munbar (wonderful Barnum) in Verne's Birkenhead based novel *The Floating Island* (1895). *The Floating Island* contains two major surprises that will end our story. Barnum also appears in the last chapter of Verne's 1864 novel *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* – a novel with close ties to Birkenhead.

### **Sir Stafford Northcote - 1st Earl of Iddesleigh.**

President of the Board of Trade under Prime Minister Lord Derby. Chancellor of the Exchequer under Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli at the time of the writing of Jules Verne's *Mysterious Island*. Northcote was one of the British commissioners for the settlement of the Alabama Claims with the United States, culminating with the Treaty of Washington in 1871.

In 1868 Northcote bought a yacht from a Confederate supporting Lancashire coal merchant named John Lancaster. In 1870 the yacht became the first British steam vessel to sail through the Ferdinand de Lesseps built Suez canal – the name of that yacht was *The Deerhound*.

Northcote's actions would seem to suit the ironic humour of our story. In *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, Jules Verne would write *So all honour to M. de Lesseps!*

### **James Dunwoody Bulloch (30 Sydenham Avenue, Toxteth, Liverpool).**

The Confederate spy who commissioned the CSS *Alabama* (Captain Nemo's *Nautilus*) and a friend and business partner of ex-Confederate President Jefferson Davis in Liverpool. Bulloch 'fostered' Jefferson Davis's two boys Jeff and Billy as they stayed at his house in Crosby, Liverpool for around 18 months between 1867 and 1868. Bulloch signed the visitors book at the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1891 (Wirral Archive Service).

### **Irvine Bulloch (1 Sydenham Avenue, Toxteth, Liverpool).**

Brother of James Dunwoody Bulloch, the Confederate Agent who commissioned the CSS *Alabama* (Captain Nemo's *Nautilus*). Officer on the CSS *Alabama* who is said to have fired the last shots before she was sunk by the USS *Kearsarge* off Cherbourg France on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1864. Bulloch later served as an officer on the commerce raider CSS *Shenandoah* and navigated her from Alaska to enact the last surrender of the American Civil War at Tranmere, Birkenhead on November 6<sup>th</sup> 1865. This surrender - one of the momentous dates in American history is commemorated in both *Mysterious Island* and our fifth novel.

### **Matthew Fontaine Maury – The Father of Modern Oceanography – The Pathfinder of the Seas and a Confederate Agent during the American Civil War.**

Friend of John Laird, builder of the CSS *Alabama* (Captain Nemo's *Nautilus*) and a visitor to Birkenhead. Maury's family lived in Birkenhead at the end of the American Civil War. Worked on the Birkenhead financed, researched, and manufactured 1857 Transatlantic cable alongside Samuel Morse and others. It is not inconceivable that Maury was a consultant on some aspects of the novel *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* as he is praised in both the novel and in the memoirs of Raphael Semmes.

### **Lord Kelvin**

The most famous physicist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As George Thompson he worked on the 1857 Transatlantic cable in tandem with the research engineer Fleeming Jenkin at Birkenhead. Lifelong business partner of Fleeming Jenkin and a regular Christmas visitor to Lord Derby's Estate at Knowsley Hall. Lord Kelvin will form a major part of the link to our fifth novel. According to his 1910 biographer (Silvanus Thompson) Lord Kelvin was also a visitor to Druid's Cross, the South Liverpool home of his wife's brother-in-law, Sir Alexander Hargreaves Brown.

### **Benjamin Disraeli.**

Conservative Prime Minister after Lord Derby's retirement and was a personal favourite of Queen Victoria. Long standing partnership with Lord Derby of Knowsley Hall. While Lord Derby led the Conservatives in the House of Lords, it was Disraeli who led the party in the House of Commons. Disraeli said of Birkenhead in 1847 '*As yet, the disciples of progress have not been able exactly to match this instance of Damascus, but it is said that they have great faith in the future of BIRKENHEAD.*' Would presumably have been a close associate of Birkenhead M.P. John Laird. As a novelist and bon viveur, Disraeli will make a guest appearance in our fifth novel.

### **William Gladstone.**

Liverpool born four times Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Son of slave owner John Gladstone. Major family links to the Royal Mersey Yacht Club and Prime Minister at the time of the settlement of the Alabama Claims. Gladstone's father, the slave owner John Gladstone is referenced to as *Lord Seaforth* in the Jules Verne's 1864 novel *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* – a novel that begins and ends in Birkenhead.

### **Charles Dickens**

Jules Verne's favourite author. Close associate of the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell. Dickens visited Birkenhead and New Brighton on several occasions and was a close friend of Dingle Group abolitionist Lord Denman. Encouraged Elizabeth Gaskell and Harriet Beecher Stowe to visit the abolitionist William Wilson's candle factory at Bromborough Pool (Port Balloon in *Mysterious Island*). Wilson's unique patented candle making process is copied by Verne in his novel *Mysterious Island* as a tribute to his worldwide role in the abolitionist movement. Visitor to the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.

### **Elizabeth Gaskell**

Abolitionist author and friend of both Charles Dickens and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Gaskell regularly holidayed at Birkenhead in the 1820's. A relative of Charles Holland at Vale House New Brighton – the setting of a large part of our fifth novel. Pays secret tribute to the Dingle Group abolitionist John Cropper, as well as William Wilson in her 1849 novel *Mary Barton*. Wrote about the *Ladies Tranmere* in her last novel *Wives and Daughters* (1865). Related to Wedgewood family of abolitionists as well as to Charles Darwin. Her name is carved in Dakkar's Grotto in the Lady's Cave on Hilbre Island. If Elizabeth Gaskell is actively involved in our adventure, then it is difficult to conceive the absence of Charles Dickens.

**Jefferson Davis – ex President of the Confederate States.**

Personal friend of Royal Mersey Yacht Club members Charles Prioleau and Francis Tremlett as well as business partner to James Dunwoody Bulloch, the man who commissioned the CSS *Alabama* / Captain Nemo's *Nautilus*.

Jefferson Davis will return to our adventure by giving his personal support to one very important unifying force in our adventure.

That unifying force will see a stronger reunified United States begin to assert its power on the world stage at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Next on Jules Verne and the Heroes of Birkenhead.**

**31. Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*.**

**Part 30.**

**Who were the Birkenhead  
'Friends' of Jules Verne?**



**Photographic Acknowledgements**

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