

MARITIME ARCHIVES & LIBRARY**INFORMATION SHEET 14****PACIFIC STEAM NAVIGATION COMPANY (PSNC)**

The Pacific Steam Navigation Company (PSNC) was set up in 1840 to run steamer services on the west coast of South America. William Wheelwright, an American master mariner and shipbroker with experience of operating steamers in South America, inspired its foundation. He was appointed Chief Superintendent in 1840 and took overall control after a dispute with the original directors in 1843.

PSNC successfully overcame all of the problems of operating on a distant 4,000 mile coastline with many navigational hazards and few facilities. The company was quick to take up technical innovations such as iron hulls (1845) and compound engines (1856). After a dispute with the Panama Railway Company, it started a direct Liverpool-Valparaiso service from 1868. By 1873 it had the largest merchant steamer fleet in the world (fifty-seven vessels) but an over ambitious weekly Liverpool-Callao timetable caused losses and cutbacks in 1874-1875.

In 1877 six of its laid-up steamers were used on a new London-Australia service in partnership with Anderson, Anderson & Co., which eventually became the Orient Line, and in turn, was eventually sold to the Royal Mail Group in 1906. The South American services continued to be its main focus but these were beset by local wars, leading to economic disruption, competition and the navigational hazards which led to a continual loss of ships. Nevertheless, it was able to maintain its strong position, helped by an extension of its charter and the modernisation of its fleet, which began to include larger luxury passenger liners such as the *Orcoma*, the 'electric ship' of 1908. In 1910 the rapidly expanding Royal Mail Group bought PSNC, but it continued to operate separately with its existing policies.

During the First World War, PSNC's fleet served as transporters, hospital ships and armed merchant cruisers (eleven were lost). The opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 intensified competition, especially with US lines to Ecuador, Peru and Chile. After the war PSNC counteracted by starting a New York-South America service and building five new motor cargo ships. In 1922 Chile decided to reserve its coastal trade, which was a major blow. The Royal Mail group collapsed in 1931 and PSNC was rescued. Apart from its 20,000 ton express passenger liner, *Reina del Pacifico*, its ships were slow, ageing and reduced to a total of fourteen by 1938. Renewals, ordered in 1939, were held up by the outbreak of the Second World War. Five new ships were delivered between 1943 and 1948.

The new tonnage and the extended route, with an increased number of calls at Caribbean ports, saw a revival in the 1950s and early 1960s. However, the advent of the jet aircraft reduced passenger traffic with competition from subsidised national shipping lines affecting cargo. In 1960-1961 two tankers were purchase. In 1965 PSNC and Royal Mail were bought by Furness Withy. Conventional cargo services were gradually phased out in favour of combi-vessels and in 1983 a single container ship as part of a consortium. In 1980 Furness Withy, including PSNC, was taken over by Hong Kong shipowner, C.Y. Tung, and re-sold to the German Oetker shipping group.

Records

Chartered and Parliamentary, 1840 - 1983.
Administration, 1838 - 1965.
Conference and Joint Committees, 1914 - 1950.
Legal and Property, 1864 - 1966.
Investment, 1840 - 1931.
Financial, 1873 - 1976.
Management, 1912 - 1979.
Insurance, 1925 - 1944.
Operational, 1854 - 1978.
Staff, 1846 - 1977.
Ships, 1860 - 1978.
Photographs, 1892 - 1980.
House Magazines, 1919 - 1972.
Ephemera, 1860 - 1970.
First World War.
Second World War.
Miscellaneous.

B/PSNC (1838 - 1982: 78 Volumes / 73 Boxes)

Bibliography

DOUBLET, A.R. *Pacific Steam Navigation Company: Its Maritime Postal History, 1840-1853*. London: Royal Philatelic Society, 1983.

HAWS, Duncan. *Merchant Fleets No. 8: Pacific Steam Navigation Company*. Hereford: TCL Publications, 1990.

LINGWOOD, John E. *The Steam Conquistadores: A History of the Pacific Steam Navigation Company*. Widnes: Swale Press Ltd., 1977.

McGARRY, E. JOHN. *Ploughing the South Sea: a history of merchant shipping on the West Coast of South America*. Milton Keynes: AuthorHouse UK Ltd., 2006

WARDLE, Arthur C. *Steam Conquers the Pacific: A Record of Maritime Achievement, 1840-1940*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1940.