

# MARITIME ARCHIVES & LIBRARY

## INFORMATION SHEET 8

### THE GREAT TRANSATLANTIC LINERS

The story of the Liverpool-based 'great liners' is usually associated with the passenger liners of the Cunard and White Star Companies. A 'liner' refers to a ship, which sails to a regular advertised schedule on a particular route.

The wooden paddle steamer *Britannia* was the pioneer Cunard liner, leaving Liverpool for Boston in July 1840. The early Cunarders were designed to attract first-class passengers. However, the passenger accommodation was sparse. Cunard's early competitor, the American Collins Line, provided somewhat better accommodation, but went bankrupt in a few years.

Cunard's most serious competition on the Transatlantic run emerged when Thomas Ismay established the Oceanic Steam Navigation Company (usually known as the White Star Line). The pioneer White Star vessel, the *Oceanic*, created a sensation when she was introduced in 1871. For the first time, the first-class dining saloons and cabins were placed amidships, where there was less vibration from the engines.

In the last quarter of the 19th century, competition increased, particularly between Cunard and White Star. Other lines such as Inman and Guion also tried to attract the first-class passengers, but they are perhaps better known for concentrating on the ordinary emigrants. Many of the first-class passengers were Americans who wished to travel to Europe for either business or pleasure. This competition produced bigger and more luxurious liners and by the 1880's the first-class cabins and public rooms were comparable to the facilities offered by the top Swiss hotels. During the 1880's Cunard launched the *Umbria* and *Etruria*, White Star the *Teutonic* and *Majestic* and Inman the *City of Paris* and *City of New York*. They were all about 10,000 tons and capable of 20 knots. They all operated on the lucrative Liverpool to New York run and competed for the Blue Riband, a nominal trophy for the fastest Atlantic crossing, which carried tremendous prestige.

#### **The "Blue Riband"**

The date when the term 'Blue Riband' was first applied in relation to the fastest crossing of the Atlantic by a merchant ship is not known. It was an unofficial title, often frowned upon by officials of the major shipping lines operating on the North Atlantic routes. Nevertheless, liners enthusiastically competed for it until the recent withdrawal of the last large and fast liners.

It is thought that the competition really began with the inauguration of the first steamship Transatlantic mail/passenger service by Cunard in 1840 and ended in February 1973 with the sale of the United States Lines ship, *United States*, the fastest liner in the world.

But the idea of a competition may have started a little earlier. In July 1839, the paddle steamer *British Queen* (London - New York) and *Great Western* (New York - Bristol) prompted New Yorkers to place bets as to which would achieve the fastest crossing. The great rivalry between Cunard (U.K.) and Collins Line (U.S.) in the 1850's, was a major stimulus. Other lines such as White Star, Inman, Guion and many foreign lines also competed for the honour. Cunard, however, refused officially to recognise the title on the ground that racing vessels was inconsistent with the company's safety policy.

In 1935 the Hales Trophy for the Blue Riband of the Atlantic was completed, having been commissioned by Mr. Harold Hales, M.P. for Hanley, North Staffordshire. However, during 1938-52 the Trophy was in safe-keeping in a jeweller's shop in Hanley. The Cunard-White Star directors refused to accept it when the *Queen Mary* regained the record from the *Normandie* in August 1938, in accordance with the Cunard Company's expressed safety policy.

### **The "Floating Palaces"**

By the early 20th century the Atlantic crossing was established as the voyage of voyages. The best and fastest ships were employed on this route and for the first-class passengers there was luxurious accommodation, glamour and excitement. A new generation of 'super liners' were introduced, symbolised by Cunard's *Mauretania* and *Lusitania*, both launched in 1907. They were the first ships to cross the Atlantic in under five days and their fantastic accommodation earned them the title 'floating palaces'.

Despite being famous for their first-class accommodation, most of the 'great liners' also carried hundreds of emigrants in steerage or third-class cabins.

In 1907 the White Star Line transferred its express liner service from Liverpool to Southampton as the latter could accommodate larger vessels more easily and had the advantage of being closer to London and continental Europe. (It had already in 1902 been sold to the International Mercantile Marine, an American concern) In 1912 White Star introduced the 46,000 ton *Titanic*, which was so tragically sunk on her maiden voyage with the loss of 1,503 lives.

After World War I Cunard also transferred its express liners to Southampton, but some Transatlantic liners still operated out of Liverpool. In 1934 Cunard and White Star merged, to build the *Queen Mary*, with heavy government subsidy, with the aim of relieving unemployment on the Clyde.

Transatlantic passenger services from Liverpool resumed after World War II with some of Cunard's most up-to-date vessels. Airline competition signalled the end of the 'great liners' and in 1966 Cunard ended its Liverpool to New York service.\*

It is important not to forget the liners that sailed to Canada, also, in the 19th century, the Allan Line vessels. In due course this line merged with Canadian Pacific, which included the *White Empresses*. One of these, *Empress of Canada III*, made the last North Atlantic passenger voyage from Liverpool on 7 November 1971.

\* The *Sylvania* last sailed in service on 24 November 1966. It made a further crossing on 30 November 1967, from Liverpool to New York via Halifax, but this was a one-off, a "grand finale".

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### **Liner enthusiasts might wish to contact:**

<p><b>The Oceanic Navigation Research Society Inc.</b> PO Box 1641 Palm Springs, CA 92263-1641 USA</p> <p>Tel: (760) 325-5398 Email: <a href="mailto:onrs@earthlink.net">onrs@earthlink.net</a></p> <p>(publishes a quarterly journal <b>Ship to Shore</b>)</p>	<p><b>The Ocean Liner Society</b> 27 Old Gloucester Street London WC1N 3XX</p> <p>Web: <a href="http://www.ocean-liner-society.com">www.ocean-liner-society.com</a> Email: <a href="mailto:membership@ocean-liner-society.com">membership@ocean-liner-society.com</a></p> <p>(publishes a periodical <b>Sea Lines</b>)</p>
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