

## Then and Now

Some time ago, Southampton celebrated the 75th. anniversary of the sailing – on her maiden voyage – of the legendary RMS “Queen Mary” with her complement of 1849 passengers and 1186 crew, the vast majority of the latter comprising men and women living in Southampton or its environs.

In 1926 Cunard started to draw up plans for a replacement for their “Mauretania” but it was not until January 1931 that the keel of the new ship was laid by John Brown and Company on the Clyde.

Work proceeded apace but in December of that year Cunard announced the suspension of the vessel’s construction as a result of the world-wide recession in shipbuilding. Two years later, in December 1933 following the merger of the White Star Line and Cunard, it was agreed that construction would resume and, in April 1934 work resumed at John Brown’s yard and the leviathan was launched, and named by HRH Queen Mary, in September of that year. With a design speed of some 29 knots it was hoped that the ship would immediately regain the legendary “Blue Riband” but dense fog and wise seamanship dictated otherwise and it was not until a few months later that she took this prestigious (if slightly mythical) award from the French “Normandie”.

In 1940 she was joined by her sistership “Queen Elizabeth” and the wartime service of these two huge ships is truly legendary. The “Queen Mary” was de-requisitioned in September 1945 and it was estimated that during her wartime (and immediate post war) service for HMG she had travelled over 600,000 miles and carried 800,000 “passengers” comprising Allied troops and, later on, war brides. The rest is history and today the mighty ship is berthed at Long Beach enjoying her new role as a museum, hotel and conference centre.

The Merchant Navy dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup>. Century when it was decreed that every merchant seafarer should “register” so that in time of war their services would be available for the fighting Royal Navy. The Red Ensign – in a variety of designs – was flown by many ships from these islands – including ships of the Royal Navy - and it was not until about 1854 that a Merchant Shipping Act dictated that henceforth only United Kingdom merchant ships would be entitled to wear this prestigious ensign. Soon the UK merchant fleet grew to be the biggest fleet sailing the oceans of the world and despite the heavy losses of WWI (some 7.7 million tons and almost 15000 seafarers) this supremacy persisted until the outbreak of WW2 which saw some 54% of the ships flying the Red Ensign destroyed by enemy action with the loss of some 30,000 seafarers. Post war building saw partial restoration of this huge fleet and by 1957 some 2050 ships again flew the Red Ensign – but by 2005 strong international commercial competition had reduced the number of UK registered ocean-going ships of 1000 gross registered tons or more to about 440 and today that number is considerably less.

Today approximately 25,000 UK nationals are employed at sea in ships flying a variety of flags including the Red Ensign. No longer is it mandatory to man UK flag ships with UK nationals in any capacity and an abundance of lower cost seafarers means that UK nationals have to be extremely competitive in terms of wages and conditions. In effect this means that many are sailing with other nationals and it was reported that a recent “Red Ensign” cruise ship caller at Southampton had a crew complement comprising some 26 nationalities. Indeed, even amongst the 15 or so crew of a container vessel it is not unusual to find three or four different nationalities.

Undoubtedly mixed-manning poses a few problems and this was demonstrated recently during the pre-investigation into the stranding of the Italian flag “Costa Concordia” when it was stated that the Indonesian quartermaster steering the vessel had difficulty in understanding the Italian Master’s helm orders –reputedly given in “English”

Today, the turn-around of ships in port is a great deal faster than hitherto and so the opportunities to explore foreign countries, go ashore for shopping and socialise with the locals are severely restricted. In many countries security considerations may preclude crew members from enjoying any shore leave.

Together these restrictions, coupled with long periods of on-board service, means that seafarers are frequently “cooped-up” on their ships for many months without any worthwhile break in their daily routine and, on occasions, working alongside people with whom they have little in common and some difficulty in communicating with.

The ship-visiting Chaplains of the various maritime charities frequently bring much needed relief and comfort to lonely seafarers and their minibus is usually available to afford these who can get ashore for a few hours access to the shops and, in some ports, a Seafarers’ Centre where internet facilities allow them to communicate with their loved ones at home. As charities these organisations are wholly dependent on the generosity of shipping companies and individuals and without that support the world’s seafarers would be deprived of the friendship and services so freely available today.

More recently the charities have taken to positioning “on site” centres close to where the ships actually berth and this allows those who are unable to snatch a few hours ashore to nip down the gangway, buy their essential toiletries, use the internet and have a cup of tea or coffee. Yes, a very great deal has changed.