STRICK LINE - THE STORY OF A CARGO SHIP COMPANY AND ITS TRADE

(Article written for the Warsash Association magazine All Hands by Barry Peck)

Frank Clarke Strick was born in Swansea in October 1849. His father was a Lloyds agent and shipper of coal from Swansea. Frank Strick initially joined the family business before becoming a partner in a ship broking company. In 1885 he moved to London and formed Frank C Strick & Company Ltd. In time he owned or had interests in many enterprises, notably the iron ore trade from North Africa, coal bunkering depots, Suez Canal facilities, and interests in the Persian Gulf including a lighterage service from the Shatt-al-Arab bar up to Basra and Khorramshahr.

However, it became obvious to him that owning the ships required for these businesses would maximise the profits. In 1887 he therefore bought his first ship, the *Normand*, which he sold the following year to finance a bigger ship, the *Alphonse Perran*. These early ships were for the Mediterranean trade, and in 1893 he built the first Persian Gulf trade ship, *Arabistan*. From these beginnings grew what became two separate fleets, one trading from South Wales to France and other Mediterranean ports with coal and general cargo outwards and iron ore and other cargoes homewards, and the second one carrying bunker coal and general cargo to the Persian Gulf and local produce homewards, although until 1912 the ships interchanged between the two trades. Strick had business associates in Paris and the Mediterranean trade was a partnership between them, however the Persian Gulf trade was Strick's own business. The Mediterranean trade ships were under several different companies and funnel designs, while the Gulf ships were owned by Strick and sailed under the famous chevrons on the funnel and house flag.

The Mediterranean trade ships (the "Medi" boats as they were usually known) lasted until after World War II. By that time the trade was dying and by 1952 the surviving ships were sold, leaving the Gulf trade, which was growing with the oil industry and those countries' development, to continue the Strick name. Because of this early demise, very little remains recorded of their history or trade.

Although inevitably over the lifetime of the two fleets some ships were built in other shipyards, Strick and his succeeding company directors had two preferred shipbuilders who supplied the majority of the two fleets. William Gray & Co Ltd of West Hartlepool built 39 ships between 1893 and 1927, and John Readhead & Sons Ltd of South Shields built 46 ships between 1926 and 1970, the final two after the yard had been taken over by Swan Hunter Shipbuilders Ltd.

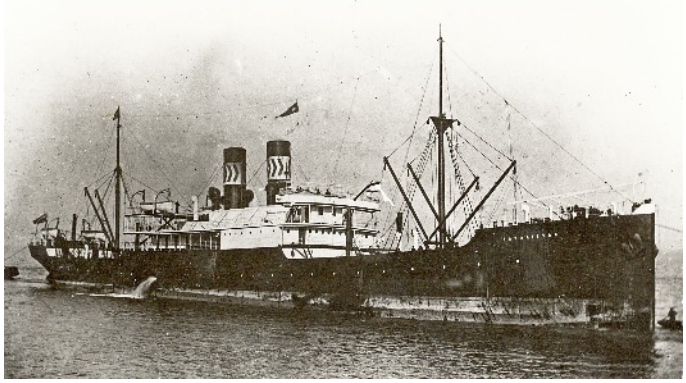
Strick Line Ltd was formed in 1913 by merging two of the earlier companies owned by Strick and his associates. It should be noted that the parent company, Frank C Strick and Co Ltd, remained throughout wholly owned by Strick and following his death the directors of the company who owned the shares. The company shares were never traded publically. In 1919 Strick Line Ltd was sold to the P&O SN Company to raise money to replace war losses, but Strick remained as ship and trade operator. In 1923 restructuring within P&O created Strick Line (1923) Ltd, and then in 1928 Strick acquired 49% interest in this company which continued to operate as a separate shipping line until finally in 1972 P&O re-acquired the 49% interest and integrated the fleet and the Gulf trade into the P&O General Cargo Division which had been formed the previous year. In 1946 the company was again renamed as Strick Line Ltd.

Right from 1893 the Gulf trade ships, the "Stan" boats as they were known to every stevedore in the UK, with one exception always carried a name ending in "istan", which were place names in Persia and the surrounding Arab countries. This comes from the Persian and Arabic meaning land of or place of, and a careful search of old maps of the area will discover most of the names. The only exception was the 1927 built *Arabistan*, (pictured left) which in 1929 had its name changed to *Bandar Shahpour* at the request of the Shah of Persia to commemorate the opening of the port of that name in the Khor Musa.

The Strick Line management was notably in two stages. Frank Strick personally managed the ships and trade into the middle 1920s when he was approaching his eightieth year. While he then continued to take an active interest, finally retiring in 1939, his board of directors became the controlling influence. This showed in the change of preferred shipbuilders, but also notably in the retaining of the ships. Strick himself would build or purchase ships, make a quick profit, then sell them on and use the money to buy more ships. Sometimes he would order a class of ships and sell some of them on while they were still building. However, from 1927 onwards the company purpose built ships for the trade and kept them for their economic working lives.

The manning of the ships also reflected this trend. Strick Line ships throughout had British deck and engine officers. Initially British sailors and stewards and Arab firemen were carried, then later it was all British crew and for the period 1920 – 1925 there were Chinese catering staff. From 1925 onwards the crews were Indian deck and engine with Goanese catering. The carpenter was normally Chinese.

From 1909 to the amalgamation of the ships into P&O GCD in 1972 there was a working arrangement with Ellerman Line, called the Strick and Ellerman Line. This was purely a trading and marketing arrangement between the two companies with Strick as the freight manager for the Persian Gulf trade, and there was never any other connection between them.



With some variations the appearance of the ships from the beginning until World War II was fairly standard, usually with three islands, one funnel, two masts and four or five hatches. Notable exceptions were the *Tabaristan* of 1907, (pictured right) which had two funnels and after World War I a class built in the early 1920s that had king posts fore and aft instead of masts. It was only after World War II when the ships were being designed specifically for the Gulf trade that the ships had their own characteristics and were immediately identifiable as Strick Line.

During World War I six Gulf ships were lost, four by enemy action, one wrecked and one disappeared fate unknown. Strick managed nine captured German ships for the Government. Five war standard ships were purchased to replace the losses.

Up until 1926 the bar at the mouth of the Shatt-al-Arab river could not be dredged deeper than 20 feet, and lighters were used to partially discharge the inward bound ships. However, there were never enough lighters, and the ships, when fully discharged, would often do a lightening trip before leaving the Gulf. In 1923 and 1924 the *Serbistan* and *Muristan* each spent 18 months acting as lighters. As this was not planned before the ships left the UK and crew changes were not practicable this was not a popular task on board!

In the mid-1920s Strick Line began to seriously build ships designed for the trade, and from 1927 to 1930 a class of seven ships were built, *Arabistan* (renamed *Bandar Shahpour* in 1929), *Baharistan* (re-named *Selvistan* in 1958), *Floristan*, *Arabistan*, *Gorjistan*, *Kohistan* and *Registan*. This was the first time that ships were built for long term service, and the three that survived World War II lasted into the early 1960s.

During the 1930s the major world problem was the Depression. This had a huge impact on the British merchant navy and the shipbuilding industry, and Strick, as with most shipping companies, did not invest in new tonnage during that period.

Following the Depression a further class of six ships were built between 1937 and 1940, *Armanistan, Baltistan, Shahristan, Turkistan, Afghanistan* and *Baluchistan*, the last two completed after the start of World War II. Two of these survived and also lasted into the early 1960s. An advance for this class was the addition of a low pressure exhaust turbine to boost the service speed.

A second *Tabaristan,* 1925 - 1941

During World War II Strick Line ships served in all theatres, and in addition to the losses there were many incidences of daring and heroism, including the evacuations of France and Crete and various landings. Hazardous cargos were carried in dangerous waters. As in the previous war, the Gulf ships suffered heavily in proportion to the fleet size, losing eight to enemy action, one by fire and one wrecked. Six ships based on utility designs were built, *Avristan, Bardistan, Arabistan, Floristan, Registan* (sold to Hain 1945), and *Shahristan*. Strick operated nine war standard ships for the Government, while after the war the Liberty ship *Samglory* was subsequently purchased in 1947, becoming *Serbistan*. The six survivors served in the fleet into the early 1960s.

At the end of the war the fleet consisted of five pre-war ships and five wartime built ships.
However, a number of these were not immediately available for trading. Four ships were on Government contract in the Far East, with the *Kohistan* not finally returning home until August 1946. Strick therefore needed new ships and commenced ordering new tonnage.

After World War II the only outward trade was UK and Northern Europe (normally Antwerp) to the Arabian Gulf, marketed as Strick & Ellerman Line. The agreement with Ellermans was that one ship per month came from them under Strick cargo management. If no Ellerman ship was available other ships were chartered in. Main loading ports were Antwerp, Grangemouth, Middlesborough and London on the East Coast and Glasgow, Cardiff (occasionally), Manchester and Liverpool on the West Coast, normally four ships per month. This volume of trade continued right through to the P&O amalgamation in 1972.

The fleet during this period was affected by two canals. The Manchester Ship Canal had a considerable influence on the design and size of the vessels, while the open or closed status of the Suez Canal had a major affect on passage times and homeward trading patterns.

Manchester was a very important port for exporting the industrial production of the Midlands, and therefore it was essential that a sufficient number of the fleet were able to get up the Canal. The width and depth of the locks limited the beam and maximum draft, while the height of the bridges limited the air draft. The taller funnels had to be built in sections for removal at the Eastham Crane Berth inside the canal entrance, and the masts had telescopic topmasts. These limitations meant that if one class of ship was too large to use the canal then it was usually followed by another class with reduced dimensions, even though the vessel layouts were similar.

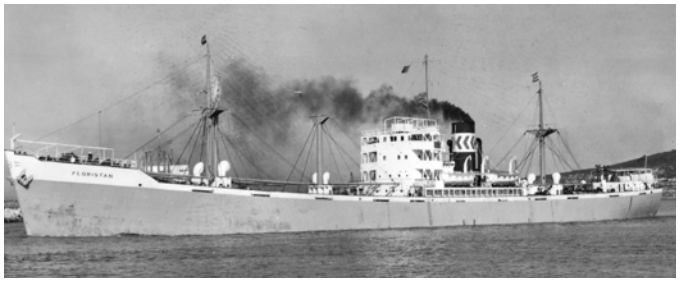
During the period between the end of World War II and the merger of the Strick fleet into the P&O General Cargo Division the Suez Canal was closed twice. The nationalisation and British and French invasion of 1956 caused its blockage for four months, then much more serious was the Six Day war of 1967 which closed the Canal until after the P&O merger due to wrecks blocking the channel. During both periods the Strick fleet, as with many other lines, was routed via South Africa. The regular, and popular, bunkering port was Durban. This increased the outward passage from about 17 to 20 days while the Canal was open, to 30 plus days when it was closed. Depending on homeward charter ports, a proportionate increase in passage time back to the UK applied. For the company this gave the inevitable increase in fuel and running costs, although for many in the crews the improvement in weather conditions compensated for the extra passage time compared with the Suez Canal and Red Sea, and the additional passage time allowed more ship maintenance.

Homewards, approximately one ship per month loaded in the Arabian Gulf and, when the Suez Canal was open, occasionally Red Sea ports to UK and Northern Europe. Most others were chartered out, normally with the intention to bring ships back to UK profitably for normal trade. Occasionally ships urgently needed were brought back light ship when the Suez Canal was open. The basic aim was to have at least three ships in any month available for loading in the UK, and preferably four. Charters took the ships to many ports from Australia in the east to the East coast of the USA and Canada in the west, with occasional discharge and loading in the Great Lakes. They rarely ventured into the Pacific area, though in the final months before the P&O GCD merger five were chartered to a Far East company loading in ports in that part of the world for crossing the Pacific to the Panama Canal to discharge on the USA East Coast.

The expanding Arabian Gulf oil industry, and also the generally developing nations of the area requiring construction materials, needed increasing amounts of heavy and indivisible cargo items. With no heavy lifting equipment in the Gulf ports except Basrah the ships had to have their own equipment. Most of the new build vessels therefore had a 50 ton derrick on the foremast to work over number two hatch, which always was larger than the others, and many also had a 30 ton derrick. Two immediately post-war had much heavier derricks on the foremast, whilst in the 1960s three were built with Stulcken derricks.

Before the post-war new builds arrived, the fleet consisted of eleven ships, *Baharistan, Gorjistan, Kohistan, Turkistan* and *Afghanistan* from pre-war, and *Avristan, Bardistan, Arabistan, Floristan, Shahristan* and *Serbistan* wartime builds.

Afghanistan 1940 -1962



Floristan 1944 - 1963

Serbistan 1944 - 1962

Shahristan 1945 - 1962

The post-war built ships can be summed up as follows. With the exception of two, all ships were ordered by Stricks. One ship was purchased during construction, and one was purchased when three years old. With the exception of three, all ships were built for Strick at the Readheads yard in South Shields, which became part of the Swan Hunter group in the late 1960s. All ships before the P&O merger were only sold for scrap or sold onwards due to becoming economically unsuitable to keep for the Arabian Gulf trade, the main problems being increasing fuel costs and age based maintenance costs.

This article will be concluded in the next edition