

Union-Castle Line - 40th. Anniversary of the last Mailship!

In 1856, South Africa comprised four self-governing areas – Cape Colony and Natal were British and The Orange Free State and The Transvaal Republic were administered by the Boers. At that time all overseas mail delivery contracts were awarded by the Admiralty and, in 1857, they offered the Cape Mail Contract to THE UNION STEAMSHIP COMPANY and their auxiliary schooner *Dane* inaugurated the service when she departed Southampton on September 15th. 1857.



In 1876 the contract was reviewed and the Admiralty split the new contract between two companies – The UNION STEAMSHIP COMPANY from Southampton and THE CASTLE MAIL PACKET COMPANY from London, with ships of each company sailing on alternate weeks – and a passage time of 26 days. This contract lasted for some 25 unhappy years with intense (and dangerous) competition exerting strong commercial pressure on the Masters of the vessels.

The contract was again reviewed in 1900 and after some sensible discussion the two companies agreed a merger and – on March 8th. 1900 THE UNION-CASTLE MAIL STEAMSHIP COMPANY was registered to undertake the new South African Mail Contract with the ships based in SOUTHAMPTON.

In 1955 a new Mail Contract was signed (effective from January 1st. 1957) but, at that time THE UNION-CASTLE LINE and THE CLAN LINE were discussing a possible merger and, with effect from 31st. January 1956 these two great companies merged to form THE BRITISH AND COMMONWEALTH SHIPPING COMPANY.

By 1975 five large cargo-carrying passenger vessels and two passenger-carrying cargo vessels were operating the joint service between the UK and South Africa. An announcement by Sir Nicholas Cayzer (Chairman of B&C) in May 1975 provided the inevitable news that Union-Castle and Safmarine were to phase out two ships from the mail service, the *S.A. Oranje* and *RMS Edinburgh Castle*. Each vessel had served 27 years. The final rundown of the service had started. Both ships left Southampton with cargo only, on 19th September 1975 and 10th May 1976 respectively, bound for Durban where after discharge, they left for Kaohsiung for breaking.

RMS Pendennis Castle, only seventeen years old, after her final arrival to Southampton on 14th June 1976 was sold for further trading and left Southampton under her new name of *Ocean Queen* on 6th July 1976. She was eventually broken up in Kaohsiung in April 1980.

RMS Windsor Castle made her final departure from Cape Town on 6th September 1977, enjoying a special send-off, and arriving in Southampton on 19th September. Having been sold, she departed Southampton for the last time on 3rd October 1977 as the *Margarita L* under the Greek flag.

RMS Good Hope Castle arrived in Southampton on 26th September and laid up, pending sale.



S.A. Vaal made her final departure from Cape Town on 27th September 1977, arriving in Southampton on 10th October. She carried the last bag of mail shipped from South Africa by mailship after a service lasting 120 years. After discharging her cargo, she sailed from Southampton for Japan on 29th October where she was converted for a new life, cruising successfully as *Festivale* for Carnival Cruises.

RMS Southampton Castle, after leaving Cape Town arrived for the last time to Southampton on 24th October, officially ending the mail service for Union-Castle and Safmarine and bringing the curtain down on a very remarkable piece of maritime history..

The two cargo passenger liners laid up in Southampton until sold to the Italian Costa Line. *Good Hope Castle* sailed as the *Paula C* on 16th February 1978 whilst *Southampton Castle* sailed as the *Franca C* on 24th February.



Photo: Ian Boyle
RMS Southampton passing Mayflower Park on her final mail trip to SA on 16 Sept '77

CRK & RP 8/17



Mariner's Wharf, Cape Town, see *Rope Ends*, opposite