



Southampton Castle 10,538 tons 1965

Departure from tradition

In 1963 the company announced a departure from all established traditions. To complete the seven ships required for the faster mail service tenders were invited for two fast cargo liners without any passenger accommodation. It was considered that berths offered in the five passenger ships were adequate to meet the existing demand. They were to be the first mailships ever to be built without passenger accommodation. The two ships were to be named Southampton Castle and Good Hope Castle. The first of these ships came into service in May 1965. In July of the same year the new faster mail schedule was introduced, appropriately enough the first sailing being taken by Windsor Castle, on 16th July.

South African participation

Towards the end of 1965 another announcement was made which created considerable interest, particularly in South Africa. An agreement had been made with the South African Marine Corporation to give that company a participation in the mail service. Two ships were sold to them—Transvaal Castle and Pretoria Castle, and the next mailship replacement would be for Safmarine to provide, thus making that company's share in the service three ships out of seven. Transvaal Castle and Pretoria Castle were renamed SA Vaal and SA Oranje, and they sailed in Safmarine colours. They remained part of the mail service and the ships continued to be managed by Union-Castle.

In 1967 when other passenger ships which had been calling at St. Helena and Ascension were withdrawn, it was decided to add accommodation for 12 passengers to Southampton Castle and Good Hope Castle, and to arrange for these ships to make regular calls at the islands.

The late sixties and early seventies witnessed the final flourish of the big passenger mail ships. In spite of growing competition from faster and cheaper air travel the sea passage to South Africa remained a great attraction for the luxury holidaymaker as much as for the young families still emigrating in substantial numbers.

The Last Chapter

In December 1973 oil prices rocketed and shipping companies were forced to look at ways of economising on the amount of fuel consumed and increasing their revenue. Union-Castle announced that the mailships would slow down, taking an extra day on the voyage to and from Cape Town. At the same time fares had to be increased more frequently and steeply than hitherto.

Late in 1974 it was announced that cargo operations on the Europe-South Africa route were to become containerised during 1977-78. Union-Castle's interests, together with those of the Clan Line, were to be handled by Overseas Containers Ltd. About this time Union-Castle and Safmarine were looking at the future of the two oldest mailships—Edinburgh Castle and SA Oranje. Due to the forthcoming plans for containerisation, as well as for economic reasons, no plans were made for building replacement passenger ships. SA Oranje was withdrawn in September 1975 and went to Taiwan for breaking up. Edinburgh Castle made her last passenger voyage to Durban in March 1976 and was subsequently sold to breakers.

The high cost of wages and the heavy fuel bills led to the withdrawal of Pendernis Castle rather sooner than expected and she sailed on her last mailship voyage from Southampton on May 7, 1976. The advent of the container ship era, coupled with the fact that the mail ships were built for a specialised trade and could not operate profitably on cruising or any other trade without prohibitive capital expenditure, spelt the end of the remaining mailship fleet.

Windsor Castle, the last Union-Castle passenger mailship, returned to Southampton on September 19, 1977—120 years and 4 days after the 530-ton Dane sailed down Southampton Water on the first epic voyage to South Africa. Good Hope Castle completed her final voyage in the mail service on September 26, and SA Vaal on October 10.

It fell to the Southampton Castle to make the last ever mailship voyage between the UK and South Africa and her return to her home port on October 24 marked the end of a long tradition of service carrying mails, passengers and cargo on this route. There will no longer be any regular passenger service between the UK and South Africa, but cargo and mails will be provided for by the new container ship service in which Union-Castle (through Overseas Containers Ltd.) and Safmarine will be participating. Union-Castle will also be managing the OCL container ship Table Bay.