

In Praise of Famous Ships

by K. J. Brett

However inevitable in the harsh light of economic necessities, the forthcoming withdrawal of Windsor Castle and S.A. Vaal, marking the virtual ending of the Union-Castle/Safmarine passenger mail service, is a development which must bring sadness, not only to those regular travellers and servants of the Company who are directly affected, but also in a lesser degree to all who love ships and the sea. Indeed there are many, particularly in South Africa, where the comings and goings of the Mailships have for generations been part of a way of life, who will feel a sense of personal loss in the departure of these famous ships, the last and greatest of a long line which over a period of more than a century have maintained an unbroken link between the peoples of Europe and Africa.

It is natural that Union-Castle people should be partisan and regard their own ships as superior to others but it is also true to say that they are not alone in holding the view that the present generation of Mailships, notably Windsor Castle, Penderennis Castle and S.A. Vaal, are or have been the handsomest vessels afloat, with their fine lines, sensibly-proportioned amidships funnel and blessed freedom from "gimmickry". There has been something eminently satisfying about their design, a rightness of shape and scale, which has set them apart from other and sometimes more publicised passenger liners. In the case of Windsor Castle it is some small consolation to know that, even if she herself will no longer grace the seas, at least in Union-Castle's colours, her scale model will be preserved in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich as a tribute to the Line and a lasting record of ship design at its best.

If October, 1977, was a sad time, it was also an occasion for pride in looking back over the years of the Company's history and recalling so many great ships, each one famous in her day, and the doughty manners who sailed them, those awe-inspiring Captains of the past, stern, resolute and bewildered, who look out at us from contemporary photographs and are even now perhaps shaking their heads sadly in whatever oriental harbour old sea-dogs end up in.

Vessels built since World War II have been familiar to most of us, while there are still many people who remember those of the thirties; even, amongst the pensioners, a few old-stagers whose memories go back as far as the twenties and can recall the tall-funnelled coal-burners of those years, names like

Balmoral Castle, Armaoale Castle, Kenilworth Castle and Saxon (the last of the Union Line names), each of 12,000 to 13,000 tons. The early twenties saw the entry into service of Arundel Castle and Windsor Castle II, followed in 1926 by Camarvon Castle, a motor ship of modern, indeed then almost revolutionary, appearance and the first of a succession of fine vessels appearing during the thirties. Apart from the Mailships, there was then a host of Intermediates and East Africa vessels, predecessors of the later Round Africa service; the D's—Dunluce and Durham, the G's—Guldford, Gloucester, Grantully, the L's—Lanstephan, Llandoverly, Llandaff and many more.

We all have our favourites, for each vessel has its own particular character and no two are quite alike, even sister ships. At any time, however, there is usually one which inspires an especial devotion amongst those who have known her. The reason for such affection is not always clear; it is not necessarily associated with any specific advantage in design or amenities and can as easily derive from some endearing eccentricity that marks her off from others, coupled with that indefinable quality that makes a happy ship. Such a one was Arundel Castle, which began life in 1921, at 19,000 tons by far the largest ship in the fleet and symbolic of the brave new world that was to follow the War to end War. This was at the time when funnels were regarded as prestige symbols and so Arundel Castle was equipped with four in a not entirely successful attempt to outdo the great Transatlantic liners of that period. It must be said that with her four tall, thin smokestacks she presented a somewhat odd appearance; nevertheless, she retained this distinctive silhouette until undergoing major surgery in 1936 as part of the re-engineering programme then being carried out in order to provide the increased speeds called for under the new Mail contract. From this operation she emerged to all intents and purpose a new ship, and a very handsome one at that, with shapely lines enhanced by two solid, sensible funnels in marked contrast to the four spindly ones she had had before. In her new form Arundel Castle became an established favourite with the travelling public, retaining her popularity until late in the fifties, when she finally gave way to new tonnage. Another gracious old lady was Lanstephan Castle which entered service in 1914 and continued for 38 years until 1952, an impressive vessel of 11,000 tons with accommodation standards, when she was new, well ahead of her time. During part of her career she had aspirations to be a Mailship but dignity, rather than speed, was her forte and a less demanding role was found for her on the East African service.

On the Round Africa route also was Langibby Castle of 12,000 tons, built in 1929, not perhaps as elegant as some, her two funnels placed close together forward giving her a somewhat hunched-up appearance. Langibby

Castle, however, occupies an honoured place in Union-Castle's history for her incredible exploit during World War II, when in January, 1942, she was hit by a torpedo which took away the stern and destroyed the rudder. In this crippled condition she steamed a total of 3,400 miles back to a United Kingdom port, via Azores and Gibraltar, often under enemy attack and for a large part of the way unescorted. Repaired after this experience, she returned to the war effort and subsequently played a notable part in both the North African and Normandy landings. Another war voyage that is unlikely to be forgotten was that of Rochester Castle, one of the survivors of the historic Malta convoy of August, 1942, and the first vessel to limp into Valletta Harbour, battered, holed and just afloat.

Going further back into history, no account of the Company's story would be complete without some mention of the legendary Scot, crack Union liner of the 1890s, whose record time of 14½ days for the UK/Cape Town passage, made in 1893, remained intact until broken by Stirling Castle in 1936. The Scot, a twin-screw vessel of around 7,000 tons, was notable for her appearance as well as her speed and presented a beautiful picture with her clipper-bows, graceful lines, white hull and yellow funnels.

In spite of these triumphs, however, she was not a commercial success, proving very costly to run because of her enormous appetite for coal, and was sold in 1905, only eight years after her record-making voyage.

Within the limitations of one short article it is possible to name only a few from the long cavalcade of Union Line, Castle Line and Union-Castle ships stretching from the very first Mail vessel of all, the tiny Dane of 1857, to the mighty Windsor Castle of today and in doing so the writer has with difficulty picked out one or two which seemed to him to have some particular attribute that made them memorable. There are many others which have been equally famous and equally loved: Balmoral Castle, Capetown Castle, Dunnotar Castle on the East African Service (many people's favourite ship), S.A. Oranje, Penderennis Castle, and of course the Company's only cruising vessel, Reina del Mar, which during her few years in Union-Castle colours inspired an almost fanatical loyalty amongst passengers and crew.

The Union-Castle story is a long and proud one but time and change beset us all and it is clear that the day of the great passenger/cargo liner is over. The signal "Finished with Engines" has been rung for the last time and the proud and friendly Castles will be seen no more; but their names will live on in the hearts and minds of those who have loved them. For a hundred years they have been part of the scheme of things, now at the end of the day let us honour their memory and their achievements. Let us all praise famous ships.