

The Story of The Mail Ships

To the early history of the Mailships there are two very distinct parts. The first tells of the growth of two companies and of the keen rivalry that existed between them. This was the time when the entrepreneur really held the stage, and each company strove perpetually to find ways in which to outdo its rival. The second part of the story tells how they came together and prospered. This was a time of consolidation and development of a unique service.

Union Line

The story began in 1853 with the formation of the Union Steam Collier Co. The purpose of the company was to establish a line of steamers to bring coal to Southampton for the liners which sailed from there. Orders were placed for five ships—Union, Briton, Saxon, Norman and Dane—the largest of which were the Norman and the Dane of 530 tons. Before the intended service could begin operating war in the Crimea completely changed the situation. The exigencies of war provided work for the ships, but not as colliers. When in 1856 the war came to an end the ships were no longer needed for their original purpose as arrangements made during the war had eliminated the need for the collier service to Southampton.

By then the company had been renamed the Union Steam Ship Co. Ltd. At the end of the Crimean War a decision was made to open a new line to Brazil, but this proved a costly venture and was abandoned the following year. The company had no employment for its ships. While they were facing this problem, in the summer of 1857 the British Admiralty invited tenders for a mail service to South Africa. The Union Co. submitted a tender and in September were informed that this had been accepted.

It was on 15th September 1857 that the Dane left from Southampton on the very first voyage to inaugurate this South African Mail Service. The Mail contract required a voyage time of 42 days and there was to be a monthly service. There had been little time to advertise the sailing, and the cargo she carried brought in only £102. Six passengers occupied the cabins.

The stipulated time of the voyage was not to be reduced from 42 days until 1863, but by 1859 the company was giving such satisfaction that the Cape Legislative Assembly decided to pay a bonus of £250 for every day by which a mail steamer completed the voyage in less than 35 days. Already five such voyages had been made and in his report the Postmaster General was able to say "The packets which made their voyage most frequently in less than the contract time were those . . . belonging to the Union Steam Ship Co."

Captain Strutt, Commander of the Dane 1857



Dane 530 tons 1857

