

# Ocean liners of yesteryear



The liner *Oriana* being escorted into Sydney Harbour.

## **Peter Chinn takes a nostalgic look at the ocean liners that once sailed into Sydney:**

My service in the old Customs Landing Branch during 1959-64 was at the tail end of the heyday of the great passenger ship era.

Sydney would often see four or five arrivals a day, from the big P&O liners to smaller vessels from New Guinea (now Papua New Guinea) and the Pacific islands.

By the end of the 1960s, with the growth in international air travel, the shipping companies began withdrawing their vessels from service. 1955-56 was the last year that overseas passenger arrivals by sea exceeded air arrivals at Sydney: 83,087 to 56,366.

Until the late 1960s, the British merchant navy was the largest in the world and most of the ships in Sydney were flying the Red Ensign. Britain's admission to the European Union has seen the reorientation of our trading links to the Asia Pacific region and we are now more familiar with the flag carriers of China, Japan, Korea and Singapore.

In the age of the passenger liner, two great shipping companies dominated for over 100 years: P&O (Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company) and Orient Line (Orient Steam Navigation Company Ltd).

Before they amalgamated operations in 1960 as P&O-Orient Line (later, simply P&O), their vessels were quite different. P&O ships had white hulls with yellow funnels. Their crews were mostly Indian-Goanese stewards and



Lascar seamen with British officers. Orient liners had corn-coloured hulls with yellow funnels and all-British crews.

In the late 1950s, P&O's fleet comprised the pre-war *Strathaird*, *Stratheden*, *Strathmore* and *Strathnaver* (which all had gone by 1963) and the much larger ships of the post-war period, the *Himalaya*, *Arcadia* and *Iberia*. The *Canberra* made her maiden voyage in 1961.

At the same time, the Orient Line had the old *Orontes* and the *Orion* from before the war and the post-war *Orcades*, *Oronsay* and *Orsova*. Matching the *Canberra* was the company's super-liner *Oriana*.

I recall the arrival of the *Oriana* on her maiden voyage on 30 December 1960. It was a double event as she was the first vessel to berth at the new overseas terminal at Circular Quay.

While the *Canberra* and *Oriana* carried over 2000 passengers in two classes (plus 900 crew) the others accommodated about 1200 with 700 crew. In later years, these became one-class ships. The bulk of passengers were assisted immigrants who paid a fare of £10.

Shaw Savill & Albion Line was another British company in the Australian trade. It had many fine cargo vessels such as *Gothic*, *Cymric* and *Aramaic*.

Like many cargo vessels in those days, they carried 12 passengers. Above that number they were required to have a doctor on board. Their finest passenger ship was the *Dominion Monarch*, at 27,000 tonnes the world's largest motor ship at the time of her construction in 1939. A one-class (first) ship, she carried 525 passengers and a large amount of cargo.

Shaw Savill ultimately replaced her and the very old *Moreton Bay* with two innovative liners, *Southern Cross* and *Northern Star*.

The *Southern Cross* carried 1100 passengers and operated from England to Australia and New Zealand via Panama; the *Northern Star* via Cape Town with 1400 passengers.

Italian shipping companies had a large share of the passenger market, much of which was immigrant. Lloyd Triestino had three sister ships: *Australia*, *Neptunia* and *Oceania*, and *Toscana* in service from Genoa during the 1950s, being replaced by the much larger and luxurious *Galileo Galilei* and *Guglielmo Marconi*.

Sitmar, another Italian line (and in more recent times before its merger with P&O synonymous with Pacific cruises) was heavily into the carriage of immigrants.

The 1950s saw them operating the *Castel Felice*, *Castel Bianco* and the original *Fairsea* which was a converted wartime auxiliary aircraft carrier. These were in time replaced by the much-improved *Fairsky* and *Fairstar*.

Italian line Flotta Lauro was into the ex-aircraft carrier business with its *Sydney* and *Roma* during the 1950-60 period. But with two Dutch companies withdrawing from their round-the-world passenger services in 1964, the company bought *Willem Ruys* and *Oranje*, which had both been regular visitors to this port.

Flotta Lauro renamed them *Achille Lauro* and *Angelina Lauro* and renovated them. The *Angelina Lauro* carried 189 first class and 1427 tourist class passengers; the *Achille Lauro* 152 first class and 1500 in tourist class. Their time on the regular passenger service to Australia was short and they were withdrawn in 1973.



Clerks and declaration officers boarding a vessel to process passengers.



A Customs officer processing passengers at Wharf 12, Pyrmont.

Another Italian company represented in Australia was the Cogedar Line of Genoa with three relatively small ships, *Aurelia*, *Flaminia* and *Flavia* which disappeared from the scene, like so many others, during the mid-1960s.

Chandris Lines started a service to Australia in 1959 with the *Patris*, which was followed into service by the *Brittany* (until she was destroyed by fire in 1963), *Ellenis*, *Australis*, *Britanis* and finally *Queen Frederica*.

One of the finest Dutch liners serving Australia was the longest-named of all, *Johan Van Oldenbarnevelt* of the Nederland Line. The other ship of that line on the Rotterdam-Australia run was *Oranje*. Royal Rotterdam Lloyd Line served Australia with *Willem Ruys*. Two other migrant-carrying Dutch vessels were the *Zuiderkruis* and *Groote Beer*.

Dutch liners regularly visiting Sydney on the Southeast Asia service and owned by the Royal Interocean Lines were *Nieuw Holland*, *Tjiwangi* and *Tjiluwah*. These were high-risk smuggling vessels and teams of Customs Preventive Officers would be put on board to search for contraband. At the time, transistor radios had just come on the market (in the days of innocence before drugs) and large caches would often be found.

Also high-risk were the British ships of the China Navigation Company. *Changsha* and *Taiyuan*, popular tourist ships, would generally yield productive searches, to reveal not only contraband but illegal immigrants.

*Anking* and *Anshun* were two other regular visitors of the line. I recall one of them bringing a couple of hundred White Russian refugees expelled from Manchuria in mid-1959. They were very poor and their possessions were packed in ancient chests and boxes.

China Navigation Company had a fleet of much smaller vessels plying the New Guinea ports. They were immaculate vessels carrying about 60 passengers, such as *Sinkiang*, *Shansi*, *Soochow* and *Pakhoi*.

A big French shipping company, Messageries Maritimes, had a long presence in Australian waters with passenger and cargo ships. On the European service, we regularly saw *Melanesien* and *Tahitien*. But the best-known vessel of all was *Polynesie* which sailed between Sydney, Noumea and the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu).

The major islands shipping company was Burns Philp. The company had the distinction of operating three of the four Australian-registered passenger vessels on regular



overseas service. The largest were *Bulolo* and *Malaita*; the former carrying 240 and the latter 100 passengers, and *Malekula* — 12 passengers — servicing New Guinea.

With smaller passenger capacity were the Glasgow-registered vessels *Braeside* and *Burnside* on the Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia service. Other vessels such as *Montoro*, *Tulagi* and *Moresby* plied the Solomon Islands, New Hebrides and Norfolk Island ports.

Much prized “down the bay” boarding jobs by Customs Landing Branch officers were the luxurious Matson liners *Mariposa* and *Monterey* out of San Francisco. On completion of passenger declarations, Customs assistant wharf examining officers would be treated to sumptuous breakfasts before the ship berthed.

I regularly performed declaration clerk duties on Huddart Parker’s *Wanganella*, an Australian ship, and Union Steam Ship’s *Monowai*. These vessels arrived like clockwork on alternate Tuesdays from Auckland and Wellington and their crews and passengers were friendly, homely and unpretentious. We would board the ships off Watson’s Bay at about 6.30am and, after taking declarations, adjourn to the dining room for breakfast.

In its latter days of service, one of the last interstate liners, *Kanimbla*, owned by Mclwraith McEacharn Ltd, was used for cruises to Japan and Hong Kong. On her arrival in Sydney one autumn day in 1959, I put in the hardest day in my working life, collecting duty from crew members.

It was my first experience of duty collection. Half a dozen Customs assistant wharf examining officers sat at a dusty trestle table with impatient Australian crew members anxious to get away. There were no calculators, duty rates were complex and we were working in pounds, shillings and pence. It was a relief when I stepped out into the sunshine on finishing duty.

The era of the passenger ship in the Port of Sydney was one of infinite variety and colour. The ships, their passengers and crews, the company officials and the people connected with their arrivals and departures provided a rich backdrop to the working lives of Customs officers associated with them.

Progress dictated the passing of this era but those of us who lived through it are richer for the experience.