

The veteran " T.S.S. Duke of Lancaster "



A typical sailing from Heysham Harbour - 50 years ago.

This veteran turbine ship, now all of 61 years old, is lying at Mostyn on the North Wales coast, and is the continuing subject of controversy as the owner and interested ship lovers struggle to get her into an active role in the entertainment world. Her sailing days are long gone, but the evocative silhouette on the sky line, as viewed from the coastal road, has now created a band of interested followers. A new black paint job has recently replaced the graffiti covered hull, and an action group named the " Duke of Lancaster Preservation Society" is promoting her interests on Facebook, and has attracted over 2000 members and growing. In her day, however, she was a hard working ferry, running between Heysham and Belfast, and with a cruising role to Europe and Scandinavia in the summer. The Scottish West Coast was also a favourite cruise, often with regular passengers, who returned year after year. Unlike her sisters, this vessel has so far defied the scrap yard. Over the intervening years, many novel roles have been envisaged for her, and some have been briefly tried, like using her as a graffiti gallery, but red tape and planning issues continue to dog progress.

First ordered by British Rail back in 1955, and entering service in 1956, she was built in Belfast by Harland and Wolff Ltd, and ran from Heysham Harbour to Belfast with her sister ships, the Dukes of Rothesay, and Argyll until 1975, when a major conversion into a car ferry took place.

The smart new buildings had the following details:- 4,450 tons gross. Length 376ft. Beam 57.3ft . 14ft 11 inches draft. 1800 passengers, made up of 1200 second class and 600 first class. In 1963 a change of ownership to Sealink came in, and 1979 saw the end of this regular service. For her last 4 years she ran between Holyhead and Dublin. Throughout the 60's, these ships carried millions of passengers, and the author served on all three "Dukes" as a deck officer, cruising in the summer months. The following account is based on some still vivid memories.

The whole trip from Heysham usually went like clockwork. Everyone from the Captain down knew their job, and repeated their movements in exactly the same way as on dozens of previous trips. In some ways it was a zombie performance, and the transformation from a dead ship in the day, to a buzz of activity at night, added to this perception. Sleep was a priority, and one of the senior Master's at that time was even nicknamed 'Noddy' for his Herculean efforts to stay in his bunk for the maximum amount of time. The only variables were - number one, the weather, usually good in the summer, and - number two, the passenger incidents, which rose in direct proportion to the numbers on board. Drunken disturbances were common, but happened more frequently on the return trip from Belfast, when military personnel were carried. Man overboard alerts also occasionally happened in the summer months, usually as a result of a drunken prank.

Around 11pm on a typical summers evening, the trains from London would arrive at Heysham Harbour station. They had thundered through Morecambe, the nearby seaside town, locals listening expectantly for their arrival. The hordes of people, men, women, and children, servicemen etc would all disgorge and go over the short walkways from the station to the quayside, and board the ship at the berth where she had arrived that morning. The last passenger cars were being lifted onboard using nets around the wheels. No ramp existed in those years. The crew on board would then be closing the hatches and preparing for sea. Two gangways would be in place, fore and aft, for it was still the time of First and Second class. Metal barriers on board separated the classes even if one side was choc-a- block, and the other forward side, the one reserved for First Class, near empty. If the tide was right, the ships main deck might be level with the Quay, and this tempted some of the agile ones, young men and the like, to climb over the rail, ignoring the head count carried out by quartermasters on the gangways holding a clicking counter gadget in their hands. Therefore, in this glorious age of slack security, and unknown terror threats, the numbers on board were ever just an estimate. Health and Safety was also to come along later. However, the so called "Troubles" in Belfast were only a couple of years away, when actual and threatened actions would disrupt the voyages, and often cause a return to the departure Quay for baggage checks. This became monotonously common sailing from Belfast. Strict safety rules meant that a return was obligatory, even as a result of a single threatening phone warning.

At Bank holiday time, there would also be another 'Duke' boat tied up on the outside of the first one, and an unguarded short gangway allowed anyone to pass over as they wished, further blurring the numbers carried. The



ships would then sail within a few minutes of each other and arrive together in Belfast in the morning. It all went like smoothly, despite the numbers, up to 4000 souls in total that were crossing the Irish Sea.

The draft would be read, the duty officer walking along the Quay to read the figures on the bow and stern, and bridge equipment tested. Hatches and openings were secured. When the gangways were withdrawn, all hands went to their respective stations, and the Station Master came onto the Quay and blew his whistle. Really!

Then the fun started. On the Focs'le, a wire was in place around the barrel of the windlass, and this was used to heave the bow out into the dock and have it pointing at the exit from the tidal harbour. Despite the huge rise and fall of the tide, this port was accessible at any time. A signal from the bridge, using a referee's mouth whistle, would trigger the heaving off on this wire, and another signal a few minutes later to let go. It occasionally happened that the Master slammed both engines full ahead prematurely, and the powerful turbines caused a rapid surge forwards, making it impossible to free the wire from the drum. Everyone would dive for cover as the wire went taut and then snapped or worse still snapped and whipped over the heads of the Focs'le party. Normally, the third mate, in charge, blew two blasts to signal that the wire was clear, when the ahead movement could begin, but it was lost in the panic when the ship was already bounding forward. The poor shoreside dock crew were left to fish out the broken wire after departure, and set it ready for the next occasion.

Within a few minutes the ship was rushing through the entrance guarded by granite pillars called "The Roundheads" and she was manually guided by the Bosun at the steering wheel. This entrance needed care and full concentration. There was often a strong cross tide and weather conditions that were different on each occasion. The Duke of Lancaster grounded badly on rocks in 1965 entering in awkward weather and quickly turned the bottom plates into a fair imitation of corrugated cardboard, before she was repaired in Holyhead and returned to service. Rocks still stuck in the bottom had to be prised out of the steel when she was drydocked. It was quite a sight walking below the damaged hull.

Immediately after departure, the Chief Officer walked around the whole ship doing his "rounds" checking that all was OK, in particular that the barriers between the classes were locked. By this time the bars below were in full swing, and with some of the determined drinking parties buying beer by the case. This practise was a permanent source of friction between the stewards and the officers who were called upon to police the drunks and sort out the fights that started. It was sometimes very distressing to see women and children caught up in a fracas in the second class bar in a very confined space.



It was noticeable to both the seamen and officers on board that many passengers dumped their normal behaviour when on board. This was borne out time and time again when excessive drinking led not only to drunkenness but tragedy when, on occasions, someone managed to fall overboard. This happened too often when it was noticed that there was a 'shelf' running around the outside of the hull. This belting as it was called was the familiar

Happler Days on Cruises...

buffer on most ferries which were bashing against the quay day after day. At sea, and in a tipsy state, it was a magnet for drunken risk takers to stand on. Many also became very amorous, and performing couples could attract a lot of attention. A nice quiet watch on the bridge might be enlivened by graphic accounts relayed by the men reporting for ordinary lookout duty.

The route to Belfast started with a run down Morecambe Bay to Fleetwood via a buoyed channel. Each buoy was ticked off and logged in a time honoured system. The engine room also monitored the progress this way. At Fleetwood, depending on the tide, there could be a gaggle of fishing boats also sailing from that port. Experience taught the bridge watch to keep a very wary eye on them as the movement could be unpredictable and certainly made without any regard to the conventional Rules of the Road. The ship then rounded the Lune buoy and followed a course to the tip of the Isle of Man, called the Point of Ayre, and leaving Walney Island and the port of Barrow to starboard. Watches only changed at the Point of Ayre, regardless of the time taken. It varied little on the so called 'mail boat' like the Duke of Lancaster, but the other cargo ships from Heysham to Belfast could be much more susceptible to weather induced delays.

On the bridge there would be a soporific air. Just the watch keeper behind the radar, and a lookout man either side outside of the sliding doors. A newly fitted automatic pilot steered the ship and could be adjusted with one hand. Reduced lighting, some slight humming, and a very quiet and relaxed mood usually prevailed. The speed was 21 knots and this was determined by revs set and listed prior to departure. It was the second mate's job to prepare a bridge 'slip' of paper, giving the tides, revs required for each leg of the journey, and the time to be spent on each leg. This was presented to the Master just prior to sailing for his approval. The revs could be adjusted, and often were, mainly by calling the engine room on the phone during the trip to go up 5 or 10 revs or the opposite if we were unexpectedly ahead. This was not academic, because any arrival more than 5 minutes either side of the schedule triggered an enquiry and explanation. The railway mentality ruled.

Somewhere off of the Isle of Man the returning ferry from Belfast would be met. She would glide silently by, and whereas the Belfast bound ferry would stay a few cables from the island, the return vessel would be routed further out, providing a suitable distance apart. In 1937, the previous Duke of Lancaster, a two funnelled ferry without the advantage of radar, had gone ashore here in thick fog, but managed to eventually refloat.

Down below, two powerful Parmatrada turbines linked to dual shafts turning twin screws drove her smartly along. The reliability was absolute, and almost taken for granted with the mysteries of the engine room kept that way to any of the bridge personnel. A shared Officer's mess was the only time that the deck and engine staff met, and the conversation rarely referred to engines!

The long leg up to the Point of Ayre which was passed close, could be a problem if the watchkeeper was dog tired at the sailing. This was often the case due to a strenuous day's activities, especially with the few unmarried officers who had neglected to prepare for the night's trip. The need to stay on watch for 3 or more hours in the early hours of the morning, and in a lovely warm and quiet bridge atmosphere took its toll. Only a tapping on the doors by lookouts might save an unwelcome nodding off. Usually the steady progress of the Lancaster mirrored the train service that she was part of, and the watch could proceed smoothly and uninterrupted. If the weather was calm, as it usually was in the summer, there was a good chance however that the bridge phone would ring with a plea for assistance to quell a disturbance below. The drill was to call out the spare Officer sleeping peacefully in his bunk, enjoying what was called "A Farmer" i.e. a trip without the need to keep a watch. Being the farmer in the summer was a mixed blessing due to the possibility of a rude call, and it could be anything from a simple need to go down and subdue a drunk, to the need to man a lifeboat. It was safer to be on watch. Passengers could gate crash onto the bridge, often tipsy, and sometimes with a plea to throw ashes of a recently departed loved one over the side. When this occurred it all too frequently resulted in the ashes being blown back over the superstructure, despite the best efforts to avoid this.

Each officer had their own way of dealing with what could be a scary situation with aggressive drunks. Many deliberately took too long to respond in the hope that things had quietened. Handcuffs were used, and usually some seamen assisted in subduing the violence. Handcuffing to a suitable stanchion, and in some cases the handrail around the funnel, seemed to be the safest action. Often, other passengers would taunt the unfortunate handcuffed and impotent drunk by words or even by throwing beer over them. The worst cases were reminiscent of scenes depicted of the use of stocks in the Middle Ages! It was usual for the police to greet the ship on arrival in these cases, and to deal with the aftermath.

Should the weather be bad, or should there be a heavy swell causing a lot of movement, sickness soon started, and the smell became terrible. It could permeate through the ship. The "Duke of Lancaster" was fitted with fin stabilisers which worked well, but there were occasions when rough seas caused rolling and pitching. On some arrivals, it was necessary to tread very carefully to get to the stations for tying up. There was an overpowering smell, and some officers were known to wear sea boots on these occasions to avoid the mess!

On entering Belfast Loch, the watch below and the sleeping officers and Master were called from their bunks when abeam of Bangor Bay ready for the arrival. A bow rudder was used to allow the ship to swing around approaching the channel, and to proceed stern first. The bow rudder locking pin forward was lifted, and a purpose built small bridge faced aft and was used by the bridge party who walked from one bridge to the other when the swing was in progress. Usually, other vessels were around, making it a judgement when to swing, and the ferry from Liverpool would also be also be vying for entry ahead of the Heysham ferry. It was a game enjoyed by both Masters.

If the arrival was on schedule i.e. within the obligatory 5 minutes either side of the arrival time as printed in the railway timetable, life quickly returned to port mode. Drills in the morning might be scheduled, but otherwise the day was for sleeping and relaxing before the nightly return trip. This daily pattern continued uninterrupted throughout the year and in all weathers.



**In cruising mode 1964 - Langelinie Pier, Copenhagen.
Home of the Little Mermaid statue.**

The Duke of Lancaster, as opposed to her sisters, was also chosen for Summer cruising. Spring each year brought a popular run around the Scottish West Coast and islands, and in the summer, leisurely trips were arranged to Scandinavia and further south to France, Spain and Portugal. Many passengers returned time after time, and one wag on board suggested that these regulars were kept in Crewe railway sidings for the rest of the year! Using ferry for cruising duties had a distinct disadvantage in that the cabins were very small and de-

signed primarily for overnight use. This was offset somewhat by keeping the numbers down, and making extensive use of the public spaces. It seemed to be a successful formula, judging by the repeat bookings.

A cruising appointment to the " Duke of Lancaster " in the 60's was not particularly popular with the married officers who understandably wanted to be at home, often with young families, but it was a pleasant change and somewhat of a free holiday for bachelors like the author. The memories remain, and rather unexpectedly, so does the ship!

There is a full account in the ebook " Any Budding Sailors" and at bankline.wordpress.com