

THE PASSING OF AN ELLERMAN STALWART REKINDLES MEMORIES OF A GOLDEN ERA



Top Left: *City of Exeter*, one of the passenger-carrying quartet built by Ellermans in the early 1950s for the UK-South Africa trade. She was sold to Greek owners and converted to a passenger-car ferry.

Top: *City of Windsor* berthing in Cape Town c. 1932

Left: *The Belfast-built City of Venice* alongside in Cape Town c. 1934. She was torpedoed in the Mediterranean on 4 July 1943.

Inward from Florida, via South America, St Helena and Walvis Bay, **Seven Seas Voyager** berthed at the Waterfront last Friday and drew interested crowds over the weekend.

It was like old times as people watched her sailing on Sunday, continuing her cruise to the Indian Ocean islands and Far East, before she returns to Florida via the Mediterranean.

Attracting little public attention, yet interesting to ship-spotters, the modern containership **Maersk Itaqui** arrived from the Far East on Saturday morning. With her covered fo'c'sle and curved bridge sporting hi-tech equipment, she represents a departure from standard designs for vessels of her size.

The ultimate in maritime modernity contrasted in many ways with the shipping world represented by many who gathered at Christ Church Constantia on Friday to pay tribute to **Ken Payne**, that remarkable shipping personality whose recent passing concluded three generations of his family, all respected executives in Ellerman & Bucknall whose "City" ships were familiar callers at South African ports.

When the Algoa Bay lookout signaled the arrival of a steamer from the west early in March 1892, **Viceroy**, a first-time caller on charter to Bucknalls who were new-comers to the Britain-South Africa trade, dropped anchor off Port Elizabeth.

Bucknall's move was inspired by G.H. Payne, a British shipbroker, specialising in the South African trade, and who later became the company's freight manager in London

Within a year or two, nine Bucknall ships - all new vessels bearing a South African-related name and a ring of diamonds on their funnels - entered the trade.

An incident involving **Matoppo**, a vessel acquired soon after completion in 1904, illustrates seamanship at its best. Three days before reaching Cape Town, the ship shuddered and slowed down abruptly. "*Propeller blades sheared!*" muttered the frustrated master, a diagnosis confirmed by a junior engineer lowered over the stern to investigate. Indeed, all six blades had sheered!

Without radio to summon tug assistance, repairs were do-it-yourself. Passengers and crew lugged cargo from the after hold forward, and forward tanks were flooded. With the ship down by the head exposing the propeller, the engineers - standing on a stage rigged from timber cargo - began attaching a spare propeller blade, a task that took nine days

during which the stage was washed away several times by the rough sea, and the immobilised ship drifted 200 nautical miles off course.

Once her cargo had been restowed, **Matoppo** limped to Walvis Bay where another spare propeller blade was bolted in place and the ship headed for Cape Town, losing one of the blades en route.

Costly port congestion during the Anglo-Boer War, a one-way cargo trade and economic recession in the Cape spelt gloom in the Bucknall boardroom. With a large fleet and several ships on order, the ailing company sought assistance from Sir John Ellerman who operated dozens of ships under several banners. Ellerman took over Bucknalls in 1908, and six years later, the joint operation to South Africa became **Ellerman & Bucknall Steamships**.

Twenty-seven year-old Aubrey Payne - son of GH Payne - had become manager of Bucknall's Cape Town office in 1908, and within twenty-years, he was chairman and managing director of the company's South African operation.

Since its nomenclature changed to carry the prefix **City of**, the fleet became known colloquially as the City Line, characterised in the post-war years by smart cargoliners that carried 12 passengers, and the famous City of Port Elizabeth-class passenger ships. These were the epitome of elegant travel with their fares attracting the more well-heeled end of the market.

Prowling for ships' postcards for my collection - still one of my hobbies - I often pestered the staff in Ellerman & Bucknall's office in Strand Street that had become Bucknalls Cape Town headquarters in 1901. Either because they were generous, or to get rid of me, they would hand out a pile of the company's finest postcards, upon which I would linger next to the large, detailed model of **City of Port Elizabeth** in the office, and then move off to pester the Shaw Savill agents around the corner in Exchange Place.

Periods of company restructuring followed, including the ownership changing four times, accompanied by sweeping changes to its operations and fleet.

The last City ship to trade this way was **City of Durban**, one of the original nine containerships built for the South Africa-Europe Container Service in the late 1970s. Soon after P&O Container Lines had bought the Ellerman operation indirectly, the ship operating arm disappeared - as has its purchaser, now swallowed by the huge A.P. Moller Group. Its ships' agency division is now part of the Grindrod Group.

The story of the company's South African operations - Ellermans in South Africa - was chronicled by Ulick Brown, the company's energetic chairman until his retirement in 1988, and Ken Payne who had started at the bottom of the company's ladder in 1938.

Captured at Tobruk in 1942, Payne languished in prison camps until the Italian capitulation the following year, when he was sheltered by Italian peasants for the rest of the hostilities.

Back in Ellerman & Bucknall after the war - and enjoying spells at branches in other South African ports - Payne saw his career climax with his appointment as chairman in 1967.

His years at Ellermans were the company's heyday, and for those who traveled in **City of Exeter** and her sisterships, their time aboard was as special as it was for those who sailed from Cape Town last Sunday.