

Sandbach History Society: Report of the February 2024 meeting

Speaker: David Hearn

At the online February meeting of Sandbach History Society, David Hearn gave a fascinating talk about the history of the Cunard shipping line.

He began by saying that the founder, Sir Samuel Cunard, came from Halifax, Nova Scotia. Samuel was descended from Empire Loyalists in America who were on the side of Great Britain in the War of Independence. After Independence they were given land in Halifax where the British fleet was based. The family made a living supplying the fleet. In 1839 the British Government decided to out-source the carrying of mail from Britain to Canada. Samuel applied for the contract and, due to the good name of the family for honesty and reliability, was successful. *(photograph)*

At that time, he did not have any ships but nevertheless he set up the British and North American Royal Mail Steam Packet Company with Charles and David Maclver from Liverpool. A Government contract and a good name were important and shares in the company were bought within a week. Mr. Hearn said Liverpool was decided as the destination in Britain due to its established communication links and excellent facilities. The Maclver brothers handled all the operations in Liverpool. In 1840 Cunard had four ships and on July 4th that year the RMS (Royal Mail Ship) Britannia left Liverpool for Boston and New York. Passengers included Samuel Cunard and the author Charles Dickens. *(see photograph)*

Business was good and the company flourished. Travel across the Atlantic was not cheap though; a chief cabin passage to Liverpool from Halifax in 1848 was £25 which Mr. Hearn said was worth about £2600 in today's money. The company was also involved in the Crimean War (1854-56) when the British Government contracted eleven Cunard ships to transport men and equipment to the Black Sea. As a result, there was then just one ship crossing the Atlantic once a week. The company did well as they were paid every day continuously for two years while the ships were used in the war.

Transatlantic travel flourished in the subsequent decades and by 1875 Cunard had the reputation of being the "Old Reliable" company and there were trans-Atlantic crossings four times a week. The ships were known as Atlantic Greyhounds and used 6,600 tons of coal on each voyage to ensure a fast and safe crossing. By the end of the century an iconic poster referred to the Lusitania and Mauritania as the "Monarchs of the Sea, the largest and finest ships in the world" *(see photograph)*. Competition was provided by the White Star Line; the names of their ships ended in "ic" such as the Titanic. The names of the Cunard ships ended in "ia" such as the Carpathia.

Mr. Hearn said that 1903 was a crucial date for Cunard. Competition was intense across the Atlantic and the company needed to build two new ships. The British Government agreed a loan of £2.5 million (worth £247 million today) and an annual subsidy of £150,000 in addition to the mail contract. In return Cunard agreed to put their ships at the disposal of the country in times of war to transport troops and equipment and act as hospital ships. The ships were all equipped with magazines for shells and fittings for gunnery in case they were needed.

So, in 1914 the Cunard ships were requisitioned and changed into military cruisers. The RMS Aquitania was camouflaged as a dazzle ship. *(see photograph)*. The RMS Lusitania was retained on the trans-Atlantic route and in May 1915 sailed from New York to Liverpool at full speed on a

zig-zag course across the Atlantic. Due to fog off the south coast of Ireland it slowed down and was hit by a torpedo from a U-boat and sunk with the loss of 1,199 passengers and crew. Mr Hearn said that the U-boat did not follow "Cruiser Rules" which state that an unarmed ship should not be attacked without warning. On the other hand, it is alleged that the ship was carrying 3000 rounds of ammunition. The incident was the subject of great debate at the time.

Between the wars the shipping companies competed for the Blue Riband, an unofficial award for the fastest crossing of the Atlantic. The RMS Mauritania held the record from 1909 until 1929 emphasising that Cunard ships were fast as well as comfortable. In the 1930s Cunard introduced the Queen Mary with its well-known three funnels. Then when the White Star Line ran into financial trouble whilst building the Queen Elizabeth, Cunard took over the company and ensured the ship was completed. In World War Two both were used as troop ships. Over 16,000 troops and crew were transported on one voyage of the Queen Mary, the record for the most people on a vessel. The Queen Elizabeth was brought into service before her sea trials were complete and transported 750,000 people during the war.*(photograph)*

Mr. Hearn said that after the war more people travelled across the Atlantic by plane and Cunard's fortunes declined. The company was briefly involved in the airline business taking a 60% stake in Eagle Airlines and also linking with BOAC. In the 1960s the emphasis changed to luxury rather than speed and the cruise business boomed. In 1982 Cunard ships such as the QE2 were again requisitioned to carry troops during the Falklands War. The Cunard merchant ship, the SS Atlantic Conveyor, was also used and during service was sunk by an Argentinian missile. It was the first merchant ship lost at sea since World War Two.

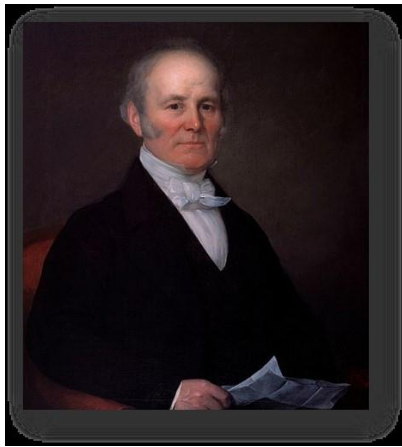
Mr. Hearn said that Cunard has always had a long and strong connection with Liverpool and the Cunard Building on the waterfront is an important landmark in the city even though the company headquarters are now in Southampton. In 2015, on the 175th anniversary of the founding of Cunard, the three liners, Queen Mary 2, Queen Elizabeth, and Queen Victoria came to the Mersey for the celebrations. Mr. Hearn informed us that the new Cunard liner, the Queen Anne which has been built in Italy, will come to Liverpool for its naming ceremony on Monday June 3rd of this year. A large crowd of visitors is expected in Liverpool on that day.*(photograph)*

The next meeting of Sandbach History Society will be in person on Tuesday March 5th at 8pm at Sandbach Library when Rod Cameron will talk about Cranage and Byley during the World War Two. For more information, go to the Society website, <https://sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk>, Visitors are most welcome but please contact the Society at info@sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk

Richard Vickery 11/02/24 (1088 words)

Photographs

1. Sir Samuel Cunard (in public domain)
2. RMS Britannia (Royal Mail stamp, 2013)
3. Lusitania and Mauritania (Cunard poster)
4. RMS Aquitania – Dazzle ship (Creative Commons)
5. Queen Elizabeth (Cunard poster)
6. Queen Anne (photograph)



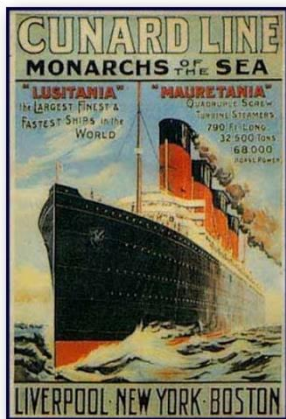
1. Samuel Cunard



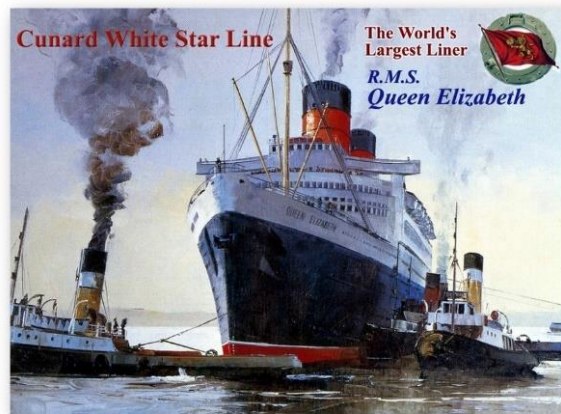
2. RMS Britannia



3. RMS Aquitania



4. Lusitania and Mauritania



5. Queen Elizabeth



6. Queen Anne