

The Blue Funnel Line (Part 1) by Allan Derham

The city of Liverpool is currently the European City of Culture, celebrating the city's architectural heritage, music, arts and sports, but the story would not be complete without including the history of Liverpool's maritime past.

From early times, Liverpool has been a major shipping port, with companies trading worldwide. A prominent shipping company was Alfred Holt's 'Blue Funnel Line'. Alfred Holt and his brother Phillip were courageous technical innovators, with a vision to embrace China and the whole of the Far East.

On April 19th 1866 the S.S. Agamemnon sailed from Liverpool, bound for China. She was the first of their screw steamships and the first to forge a link with the Far East. The voyage would be to sail non-stop to Mauritius, then on to Penang, Singapore, Hongkong and Shanghai, picking up a cargo of tea at Foochow on the return trip.

The ships Ajax and Achilles soon followed and the company grew into an established, reliable steamship shipping line.

The origin of the colour for the ships is one of circumstance and not of design. It was a tradition in those days that, on the death of an owner, a blue band would be painted round the hull, as a mark of respect. It seems that some drums of blue paint had been left on board the 'Dumbarton Youth' and this was used on the funnel. Thus began the Blue Funnel characteristics.

In November 1869 the Suez Canal opened and at a stroke the run to the Far East was reduced by 3,000 miles, saving 10 to 12 days at sea. The days of the sailing ships were now numbered.

The start of the 20th century saw Holt's company in good shape, despite plenty of competition and a few disastrous shipwrecks. By 1910 a regular cargo liner service was operating to Australia.

In the first world war the Blue Funnel Line lost 16 ships and in WWII they lost more than half of the fleet – 40 ships, some 350,000 tons. When hostilities ceased, Holts quickly returned to peacetime trading as a leading carrier of freight between Europe and the Far East.

To be continued

Additional note from Malcolm Tranter:-

Last year when I had finished a particular talk at Alston Hall, a lady from Penwortham told me that she was living in Singapore when the Japanese invaded and she and her sister and her mother had to rush down to the docks to be evacuated. There were two Blue Funnel Line ships at the quayside and the family were randomly put onto one of these. They were brought to England on the ship shown below (name not available), the other ship went to Australia.

