Union-Castle Line

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R.M.S. WINDSOR CASTLE in the Western Docks from Mayflower Park, Southampton in 1961. Martin Cox collection.

A brief Company History by Martin Cox

Union-Castle Line, famed for its lavender hulled liners that ran on a clockwork timetable between Southampton and South Africa, began as two separate companies: Union Line and Castle Line.

Union Line

The Southampton Steam Shipping Co was formed to bring coal to Southampton from South Wales to meet the demands of P & O Line and Royal Mail. Later renamed Union Steam Collier Co, both major shipping lines were represented on the board in the 1853 venture. However, after the disruption of the Crimean War, coal stocks at Southampton were high and the five new vessels were laid idle after war use by the British Admiralty. The company was re-registered as Union Line in 1857, with Southampton as head office. That same year, the British Admiralty invited tenders for the mail contract to the Cape Colony and Natal. As a result, Union Line was awarded the contract with monthly
sailings in each direction of not more than 42 days sailing Plymouth to Cape Town or Simonstown. Building a large fleet of ships, Union Line sailed on the Cape run in competition with Castle Line, until the two were allowed to amalgamate in March 1900.

**Castle Line**

Castle Line had its origins with Donald Currie’s purchase of a controlling interest in the Leith, Hull and Hamburg Steam Packet Company in 1862 after he resigned from Cunard Line. He registered his shipping business as Donald Currie & Co of Liverpool and set up for trade with India by ordering his fleet of four sailing ships, all with the suffix “Castle” in their names. In 1876, Castle Mail Packet Co. Ltd was formed. Later that year, the Colonial Government awarded a joint mail contract, resulting in a state of intense competition between both firms. The service to the Cape thus became weekly by alternating steamers. In 1883, a seven year joint mail contract was signed with the clause that the companies shall not amalgamate. In 1887, tickets became interchangeable, and in 1888, the mail contract was renewed for five years (with the non-amalgamation clause remaining). By 1890, the new DUNNOTTAR CASTLE had reduced the voyage to 17 days and 20 hours, and embarkation was switched from Dartmouth to Southampton. In 1893, both Union and Castle Lines began a joint cargo service from South Africa to New York and the mail contract was re-signed, maintaining the non-amalgamation clause. In 1899, the Boer War began, and the vessels of both companies were used as troop transports. In late 1899, a new mail contract was offered with a vital difference: One company, not two could win the award. Since both companies had built their fleets based on complimentary sailings, neither bid on the contract. Eventually a joint contract was awarded, but Donald Currie proposed a merger.

**Union-Castle Line**

It was announced in December 1899 that a merger between Union Line and The Castle Mail Packet Co., Ltd. would take place, with Castle Line taking over the fleet. On March 8, 1900 Union-Castle Mail Steamship Co. Ltd was registered. At the time of the merger, the Union Steamship fleet included: ARAB, TROJAN, SPARTAN, MOOR, MEXICAN, SCOT, GAUL, GOTH, GREEK, GUELPH, NORMAN, BRITON, GASCON, GAÏKA, GOORKA, GERMAN, SABINE, SUSUEHANNA, GALEKA, SAXON, GALICIAN and the CELT on order. The Castle Mail Packet Co. ships included: GARTH CASTLE, HAWARDEN CASTLE, NORHAM CASTLE, ROSLIN CASTLE, PEMBERCROKE CASTLE, DUNNOTTAR CASTLE, DOUNE CASTLE, LISMORE CASTLE, TANTALON CASTLE, HARLECH CASTLE, ARUNDEL CASTLE, DUNVEGAN CASTLE, TINTAGEL CASTLE, AVONDALE CASTLE, DUNOLLY CASTLE, RAGLAN CASTLE, CARISBROOKE CASTLE, BRAEMAR CASTLE, KINFAUNS CASTLE, KILDONAN CASTLE. Sailings from London were ended, the fleets adopted Castle Lines’ lavender gray hulls with vermilion funnels and the completed CELT was launched as WALMER CASTLE.

A boom expected to follow the Boer War failed to materialize, and 15 ships were laid up at Netley in Southampton Water in 1902. Nine ships undertook the weekly mail service: SAXON, BRITON, NORMAN, WALMER CASTLE, CARISBROOKE CASTLE, DUNVEGAN CASTLE, KILDONAN CASTLE, and KINFAUNS CASTLE. When the new KENILWORTH CASTLE came on line in 1904, she replaced DUNVEGAN CASTLE, which made a series of cruises to Norway, the Mediterranean and around Britain, before entering the reserve fleet at Netley, Southampton.

Lord Gladstone, the first Governor General of South Africa, traveled out in 1910 aboard WALMER CASTLE. The 1900 mail contract was extended until 1912, as the colonies united and South African Parliament formed under the Union of South Africa. The Duke of Connaught sailed to open the new Parliament aboard Balmoral Castle.

**Union-Castle under Royal Mail**

In April 1912, Royal Mail Line took control of Union-Castle and a new ten year mail contract was signed. With the Welshman Sir Owen Philipps (later Lord Kylsant) on the board, the first new ships ordered had Welsh names: LLANDOVERY CASTLE and LLANSTEPHAN CASTLE.

When the First World War broke out in 1914, the laid up CARISBROOKE CASTLE was the first ship to be requisitioned for service. By September 4, nineteen of Union-Castle’s forty one oceangoing vessels were on National service. By 1915 thirteen Union-Castle steamers were in service as hospital ships. The losses added up: GALEKA was mined; ALNICK CASTLE was torpedoed; DOVER CASTLE, CARLISLE CASTLE, AROS CASTLE, GLENART CASTLE, LLANDOVERY CASTLE, GALWAY CASTLE were all lost. By October 1919, the ‘Round Africa’ service had recommenced with a number of wartime standard ships replacing war losses, and Natal Direct Line had been acquired. Union-Castles’ first four funneled liner, ARUNDEL CASTLE (IV) commenced her maiden voyage in April 1921 (with her sister WINDSOR CASTLE (II) following a year later).

In 1925, the motorship CARNARVON CASTLE entered service, her squat funnels heralding a new profile for the next decade, and instantly making the two stackers appear old fashioned. In 1927, Royal Mail Line added White Star Line to its already vast array of shipping companies, but as the decade drew to a close, was immersed in increasing troubles. The British Treasury became involved over concerns regarding Union-Castle Line’s parent company with an aim to separate it from Royal Mail. By 1934, Lord Kylsant had resigned and Royal Mail was in liquidation. With heavy Government involvement, Union-Castle commenced a five year rebuilding program. In 1936, the biggest vessel yet, STIRLING CASTLE, beat the record to the Cape set in 1893 by SCOT. A new ten year 14 day mail contract was signed, which meant the fleet had to be re-engined and rebuilt, as only the STIRLING CASTLE and ATHLONE CASTLE could maintain the timetable. ARUNDEL CASTLE and WINDSOR CASTLE had their forward hulls and bows rebuilt and funnels reduced to two; CARNARVON CASTLE, WINCHESTER CASTLE, and WARWICK CASTLE were re-engined. By 1939, the rebuilding program was completed, and by August, signs of the coming war were all too evident. The laid up EDINBURGH CASTLE was used for trooping and DUNNOTTAR CASTLE became an armed merchant cruiser. After war was declared, CARNARVON CASTLE, DUNVEGAN CASTLE, and PRETORIA CASTLE also became armed merchant cruisers. DUNBAR CASTLE was the first casualty of the second World War, running into a mine off Deal, Kent on January 8, 1940. Also lost that year was DUNVEGAN CASTLE. WALMER CASTLE, DROMORE CASTLE, ROWALLAN CASTLE were lost, while PRETORIA CASTLE became an aircraft carrier. WARWICK CASTLE, WINCHESTER CASTLE and DURBAN CASTLE took part in operation "Torch" (North African landings), while LLANGIBBY CASTLE ferried 100,000 troops in 60 channel crossings in D-Day maneuvers. At the end of the war, 274 Union-Castle personnel had been killed aboard ships lost in action. After the war ended, Union-Castle ships were still employed in carrying troops all over the world.
In 1946, South African sponsored a scheme for engineers and their families to emigrate from Britain to fill badly needed positions. CARNARVON CASTLE, WINCHESTER CASTLE and ARUNDEL CASTLE were employed on this service, which was an improvement on their troopng days but not up to pre-war standards. DURBAN CASTLE was placed in austerity service before resuming the round Africa route. It was 1947 before passenger services were restored with the sailing of CAPE TOWN CASTLE and STIRLING CASTLE on the mail service and LLANDOVERY CASTLE on the Round Africa run. ARUNDEL CASTLE returned from reconditioning in 1948, while the "R" class cargo ships handled the mail service in the meantime. DUNNOTTAR CASTLE resumed round Africa service in February 1949. Another major rebuilding program was needed, resulting in thirteen new ships: PRETORIA CASTLE and EDINBURGH CASTLE (from Harland & Wolff); for the mail service; KENYA CASTLE, BRAEMAR CASTLE and RHODESIA CASTLE (intermediate liners); BLOEMFONTEIN CASTLE (for round Africa service); RIEBEECK CASTLE and RUSTENBERG CASTLE (to carry refrigerated cargo); TANTALLON CASTLE, TINTAGEL CASTLE, DRAKESBERG CASTLE, GOOD HOPE CASTLE and KENILWORTH CASTLE (for general cargo); GOOD HOPE CASTLE and DRAKESBERG CASTLE were registered in South Africa, trading to the United States. On 4th October 1955, the British press broke the story of the proposed merger of the Cayzer Family-owned Clan Line and Union-Castle Line.

British & Commonwealth Shipping Co

Early in 1956, British & Commonwealth was formed, which consolidated Union-Castle, Clan Line and Bullard King Group. The management, routes and colours of each company were unchanged, but competition was removed within the companies, and interchanging of cargoes began. A replacement for the aging ARUNDEL CASTLE, PENDENNIS CASTLE (the largest liner yet for Union-Castle) sailed on her maiden voyage in 1959. She was followed by the even larger WINDSOR CASTLE in 1960 (the largest liner yet to visit Cape Town). The all-one-class TRANSVAAL CASTLE was commissioned in 1962. Pacific Steam Navigation Co’s REINA DEL MAR was painted in Union-Castle colours in 1964, and managed by Union-Castle until purchased in 1973. In 1966, a joint mail service was run by Union-Castle and the South African Marine Service. When TRANSVAAL CASTLE and PRETORIA CASTLE were transferred to Safmarine ownership, they were renamed S.A. VAAL and S.A. ORANJE, respectively. With air competition, freight containerization and soaring fuel costs, the traditional service to South Africa was rapidly coming to an end.

Footnote:
In 1999, the Union-Castle Line name was revived for an advertised “Round Africa” sailing on the old Union-Castle route. P & O Line’s VICTORIA (British-built former KUNGSHOLM) sailed December 11, 1999 from Southampton on a millennium cruise with her funnel painted in Union-Castle vermilion. New Year’s celebrations were held in Cape Town with the VICTORIA returning to Southampton in February 2000.

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