At this time, Andrew Weir (now Lord Inverforth) and the Bank Line Board had placed an even bigger order for 21 ships, from William Doxford and Sons in Sunderland, beginning with the Firbank. The vessels that emerged were noted for having slightly more rakish lines, the most obvious difference being in the funnel shape; Harland’s tended to be flat-topped. It was a familiar pattern, with orders divided more or less evenly between the two yards on opposite sides of the UK. All new build orders for the Bank Line went to UK yards. Although the company continued to place orders for vessels up until the 1980s, this particular period was probably the peak of the post-war building spree. The following 20 years’ or more of steady global trading provided work for a modern fleet that hovered around the 50 ship mark. The old stalwarts that had survived WW2, and a dozen stop-gap Liberty ships that had given good service, were phased out as new smart vessels joined the fleet. Smart they may have been, but who would have guessed that break bulk vessels of this type were shortly to be mostly redundant and would be replaced by the large container types? A crystal ball would have been useful, as always, but in hindsight, these new buildings at least had a long and satisfactory career. A later 12 ship order placed in the 1970s, and starting with the lead ship Fleetbank, was not so lucky and resulted in vessels being disposed of in as little as eight years.

Crossing over on the Irish Sea Ferry, I was a bit overawed being sent to serve on such a ‘modern’ ship! My previous vessels had included a wartime Liberty ship, the Maplebank, and a wartime coal-burning Empire Boat, the Hazelbank. I also had a spell on the 1930s built passenger vessel, the Inchanga. This was now the nearest I would ever get to sailing on a new vessel, and she even had some basic air conditioning, meaning that the ubiquitous oscillating fan was no longer the most important cabin fitting. She
also had a ‘Brown’ fitted gyro, and auto steering. More about this beauty later.

The honour of having the class name traditionally went to the first vessel off the stocks, called the lead ship - in this case, the Cloverbank completed in 1957. These were shelter-decked vessels of dimensions 483ft long, 62.9ft wide, and a 26ft loaded draft. Deep tanks were provided for the regular oil cargoes that Bank Line carried. Lube oil or similar from the US Gulf ports went out to Australia and New Zealand, and vegetable oil, mainly coconut oil, from the Pacific Islands was carried homewards on a regular basis. A six cylinder diesel engine by the builders gave them a decent speed of 14 knots plus, and a daily run often well in excess of 300 miles was something I had not been used to! The opposed piston engines now burnt heavy fuel oil, and were also turbo charged. However, scavenge fires were a daily occurrence and we soon got used to slowing down at sea while the engineers went through the drill to dowse them. Familiar clouds of black smoke observed from the bridge would signal what was coming.

Between March 1957 and March 1964 all 17 vessels of this class were delivered. After the first dozen were launched there were minor modifications to the design. The heavy lift derrick became 50 tons, and other slight changes made in light of the experience with the earlier vessels. All of these ships, however, gave a good 16 or 17 years of service before being sold on. Crestbank went to Greek owners after 16 years, where she gave a further five years’ service afloat. Only the Levernbank out of the 17 was unlucky enough to be lost. In 1973, She stranded spectacularly between some cliffs in southern Peru, near Matarani though, fortunately, without any loss of life.

The voyage, or voyages ahead on this occasion, would complete my time for a Master’s ticket, and the whole trip was to last 14 months and take in transits of both Panama (twice) and the Suez canal. This was less time away than many Bank Line voyages, which were still completing the statutory two years before Officers were relieved. We were not to know.

On boarding in Belfast, the Master turned out to be a genial and pleasant man appointed to his first command. This, understandably, made him a bit apprehensive when we were navigating close inshore or through islands. On the ‘graveyard’ watch from midnight to 0400 hrs, the traditional watch for the second mate, it was irksome sometimes to share the space and solitude with him. However, his nature was far removed from some of the post-war Masters we suffered. Many were tyrants, drunks, or social outcasts - sometimes all three!

Crestbank was a big improvement on the older ships, but it was still years before reliable and efficient air conditioning. We did have extra rooms, like a lounge, and a minuscule drying room, but improvements further down the line, like a bar, a pool perhaps, and a nippier boat for rescue and runaround were still years away in the offing. The lounge was rarely used, lacking the crucial feature of a bar. It was a barren place. On the bridge the equipment included the chunky automatic pilot which we treated very suspiciously. It was no substitute for a quiet and trustful Indian seacunny standing there silently. There were various minor improvements, but it was still many years before satellite navigation or the global positioning system was to arrive. Navigation in the fifties was still reliant on the tried and trusted ‘star
sights’ morning and evening, weather permitting, and the morning longitude with a run up to the noon position. Like many mariners before and after this time I suspect that, just like me, they got a great feeling of satisfaction from plotting a position from celestial observations. It was an art form, rather than science, and all the better for it. Judgement was needed, especially when a clutch of position lines on the chart formed an almighty great box! Which ones to ignore was the burning question?

**AUTO STEERING**

The new auto steering was a boon, but it could also be dangerous, and the company was to lose a nearly new ship, the Trentbank, in September 1964, which was attributed to problems with the steering gear. The resulting enquiry established that faulty self-steering was the culprit, and went on to censure the Officer of the watch for not keeping a good lookout. The ship, unfortunately, made an unintended turn directly into the path of an oncoming ship, and went on to censure the steering was the culprit, establishing that faulty self-steering. The resulting enquiry was to lose a nearly new ship, dangerous, and the company was a boon, but it could also be. AUTO STEERING

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**Example of a ship’s Gyro Compass Repeater.**

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I laughed hysterically, and was glad to see the back of it. Fortunately, this was to be a very happy trip, with good shipmates visiting a few out of the way places, like Basra in the Persian Gulf, and Novorossiysk in the Black Sea, but like all Bank Line voyages, we never knew how long we would be away from home.

First we sailed light ship from Belfast to Trinidad, and the bitumen Lake near Point Fortin where we anchored.

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**Trentbank was fatally holed following a collision with Portuguese tanker Fogo due to faulty self-steering.**

(Chris Howell)

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It was a regular Bank Line loading port, and had been my first foreign port some eight years earlier. The magic of the tropical dawn and the stillness of the water as we lay at anchor were special. Before the heat of the day, all would be almost silent with only the splashing of diving birds, and distant barges approaching piled high with bitumen drums. Voices carried over the water as the barges approached.

The world outside was still in the ’cold war’ era, and Alaska had just been made the 49th State of the USA, but we were alone in our own little world. The Shell Company, who operated and ran the local operations, kindly invited us up to their facilities of clubhouse, pool, and bar which we greatly appreciated. Once again, the magic of the area kicked in for me leaving a lasting impression. The heavy tropical vegetation and raucous cicadas doing their thing as we walked back to the shore boat in the evening all added to the idyllic atmosphere. Uninhibited, not to say merrily drunk singing favourite seaman’s songs, may have also helped!

This was the first trip I had sailed with wives on board, a common practice nowadays, and now of course, not just for the senior officers. I found it a bit unsettling, but we all carried out our respective duties without comment. There were times things got a bit fraught, for example, when an attractive young wife on board was invited by the Captain to sun herself in a bikini on the bridge during my watch. He also asked me to teach her some chart-work, which I flatly refused to do, not wanting to get too involved. How times have changed! Maybe we all become dinosaurs eventually.

We transited the Panama Canal after completing loading and crossed the Pacific without incident. There was the morning routine of opening the medicine locker, and doling out linctus to the Indian crew members who requested it. Penicillin injections were also given for specific complaints. All of this according to guidance from the well-known Ship Captain’s Medical Guide. Once again, I was to marvel at the heavens mid-Pacific on the 12 to 4 middle watch. I would sit up on the monkey island on a cloudless night in the early hours with a stunning and breathtaking canopy above. No planetarium could get close to this. The colours, intensity, and variety of clusters, nebula, and shooting stars were endlessly fascinating. It was rendered even more surreal by the pop and country music easily.
picked up from the American radio stations on my handheld transistor radio as I marvelled at the heavens.

We commenced discharging all around the New Zealand coast, enjoying several days in each port. The Kiwis were extremely hospitable, and our stay around the coast was a very happy one. In the small port of Tauranga in the Bay of Plenty, in particular, we were invited to local homes. The contacts we made also led to ship visits by enthusiasts.

Several years later Tauranga was designated a city, but back in the 50s, the pubs closed at 6pm. It became universally known as ‘the six o’clock swill’ as everyone scrambled to get in as many orders as possible before the bars closed. My memory is of long tall glasses of ice cold beer, and a crush at the bar as the magic hour approached. After this stop, we wended our way around the coast, often lying ahead or astern of the regular UK vessels of the NZ Shipping Company and other liner vessels loading wool and frozen lamb. Rightly or wrongly, we felt different in each port. The Kiwis were extremely hospitable, and our room sported new items from the resident wife fell on deaf ears, and the Master, who clearly ran a relaxed ship, promptly asked if I could arrange ‘one for him’!

Back on the ship, and still in port, there was a slight pantomime when the drying room sported new items from the drying room sported new items from girls on board. Objections by the resident wife fell on deaf ears, and the Master, who clearly ran a relaxed ship, promptly asked if I could arrange ‘one for him’!

After New Zealand, we crossed the Tasman sea, sailing around the North Cape lightship, before loading grain for India in Port Lincoln in the Spencer Gulf. Once again, we enjoyed local hospitality which always seemed a feature of the smaller ports. Several weeks were spent up the Hooghly River at Calcutta, discharging in the docks, and then loading gunnies on the buoys in the fast-flowing river. This cargo was destined for the regular run familiar to Bank Line ships, ie, discharging all around Africa - East, South, and West. A variety of ports were served, sometimes at anchor, and sometimes alongside, and eventually we arrived at the last port, Dakar, with its distinctive and welcoming French layout and atmosphere.

Although it felt like we were within touching distance of the UK, the older hands among us knew that with only 10 months served, there was no chance of an early return. Sure enough, orders then came to proceed lightship across the Atlantic and to take up position in the US Gulf for another outward loading, and a second circumnavigation.

Christmas 1959 therefore found us in Galveston, one of my favourite Gulf ports, and I took the opportunity to spend the 25th ashore, not caring for a shipboard dinner in port. It sort of gesture, and I gladly agreed. Fortunately, it passed off without incident.

This time our southbound cargo, that we loaded all along the Gulf ports was destined for Australian ports, starting in Brisbane. Bank Line had a frequent and regular trade out of ports from Brownsville, on the border with Mexico all the way along to Mobile. It was a hectic but fascinating programme, the essence of which was to get rock sulphur or sometimes bulk potash into the lower holds, which was then levelled by bulldozers and boarded over for heavy agricultural machinery to be loaded on top. There was everything from tractors to harvesters, and even earthmovers. These large machines were also stowed on deck. Although the stevedores were charged with the lashing, and used miles of shiny new wire in the process, we were occasionally called out in heavy weather as the machines broke loose and slithered around. It was a hairy exercise and something I had experienced on previous voyages. This happened later in mid-Pacific and we struggled together with the apprentices trying to lasso the sliding giants as the ship rolled. The rest of the tweendeck space was reserved for general cargo. From memory, there were hickory handles in bundles, cartons of lampblack, and a considerable number of palletised goods of every description. The lampblack or carbon black was a notorious cargo, difficult to remove, and
always the source of extra money for the Australian wharfies who successfully claimed ‘dirt money’ on discharge. Lubricating oil of varying type and density was booked for the deep tanks; this was loaded in a few locations including Baton Rouge, the capital of Louisiana, a day’s trip up the mighty Mississippi. Struggling with the deep tank lids is an indelible memory for those who served on this run. The port rotation in the Gulf was so arranged by the superintendents that the ship was despatched at night and, ideally, was on the next berth for commencement of cargo working the following day. New Orleans and the Mississippi passage was virtually always on the rota, and a Bank Line ship was there at least weekly. This meant that little sleep was possible, except in catnaps. However, we eventually completed loading and departed for Panama. In the late-50s, the transit was an opportunity to fill the fresh water tanks, done when the ship was passing through the lakes; a practice now barred.

Discharging commenced with Brisbane, and later Sydney, Adelaide, and Melbourne. Delightful parties on board were arranged, particularly when we were in Sydney. A wag from the engineers called a local nurses home, and he made the first call as soon as the onboard telephone was connected! A makeshift bar and music was then rustled up for the evening’s entertainment. Our new orders on completion were for another grain cargo, this time from Basra at the head of the Persian Gulf; a new destination for me. We made our way across the Indian Ocean, entered the Persian Gulf, steaming the full length to the Shatt-El-Arab waterway. The peculiar humidity of this region was remarkable. It increased as we moved northwards. Larking around to keep cool, we took to throwing buckets of water over each other on deck, and I was amazed to see the skin dry within a very few minutes as the moisture evaporated. We were totally dry. Basra in those days was a safe port and it also had some interesting and elaborate bawdy houses which my friends reported back on after a closer inspection.

Eventually, discharge was completed, and we passed down the Persian Gulf, and up the Red Sea in a lightship condition before transiting the Suez canal. It was to be a shorter trip after all, as the new cargo from Novorossiysk was destined for Europe and the UK. This was also new territory for me, passing through the Dardenelles and visiting a Russian port. I started to prepare the charts we would need as we steamed towards Suez. Bawling the cold war, the authorities had an interest in any up-to-date information we could provide on the area around our destination. We passed through the canal and on into the Bosphorus, then past the beautiful city of Istanbul without difficulty. As always there were countless boats and ships to admire. What a paradise for ship lovers. It was yet another grain cargo we were to load, and as was normal in Russia, the crane drivers were women. The cranes, I remember, were the ubiquitous Stothert & Pitt ones. Work proceeded quite slowly and, despite the tensions at that time, we were allowed ashore to sample local delights. Novorossiysk is famous for having been the front line in this part of the world during WW2. We learned that, in WW2, the German advance was halted on the Black Sea coast. A tank perched on a plinth in the town marked the exact line. It was impressive.

The rest of the trip was uneventful. It was summer in Europe so we were spared the shock of arriving in the freezing cold. A stop was made in Dunkirk to offload part of the cargo, and then it was over to Victoria Docks in London for completion.

This trip had been routine without any particular drama, and once the formalities were done and a hand over effected, I gladly jumped in a waiting taxi to head off and study prior to sitting for a new 1960s Master’s certificate.