

## A Moment in Time # 10

# Stephens, Sutton, and Company - Red "R" Steamship Company Newcastle

Commentary by Geoff Walker



The Red "R" Steamship Company was part of Stephens, Sutton & Co., one of many Tyneside tramp ship owners. This was formed as a partnership with Rowland Mawson in 1872 and they received delivery of its first steamer in 1874.

Following the trend of so many other Newcastle tramp ship operators they engaged in the UK to Mediterranean coal trade then loading grains from Black Sea ports back to the UK. This was their staple trade which ensured their ships ran fully loaded both outbound and homebound. In 1877, a subsidiary company was established as Stephens, Mawson & Goss based in Newport, Wales. Following the death of one of the founding partners, Rowland Mawson, Arthur Mawson & Co of Cardiff separated from their Newcastle associates. This allowed R.M. Sutton to be admitted as a partner in 1901, and the company was rebranded as Stephens, Sutton, and Stephens.

During WW1 three of their tramp steamers were lost due to enemy action. This required some reorganization within the company, at the conclusion of hostilities, and it became known as Stephens, Sutton & Company. This newly fashioned company grew progressively over the inter-war years and by 1939, and the outbreak of WW2 it owned a fleet of ten modern tramp steamers, unfortunately three of which were lost due to hostilities.

The post WW2 years once again saw solid growth for the company with nine new ships purchased. However, mainly due to market fluctuations, a number were disposed of, so that by the start of 1964 only three ships remained within their fleet. As of 1965, the company entered the bulk carrier market but unforeseen difficulties and serious machinery problems on several of their ships caused severe financial stress within the firm, and so a decision was taken by the Directors to dispose of their fleet and withdraw from shipping, hence their remaining ships were offered for sale in 1967. The last of their ships was sold in 1968 and the company withdrew from ship owning altogether, signaling the end of yet another British shipping concern, after 95 years of trading.

The Renwick family had considerable influence in the management of the company, (hence the ships names began with R and the Red "R" featuring prominently on their funnels)

Several of the ships were "Sold East", two of which were "Rookley" and "Ripley" for continued trading.

See captions below.



(unknown photographer)

**Rookley.** Seen in her original Trader Navigation livery Built as “**Welsh Trader**”, 7897 GRT, for Trader Nav. Co, London in 1954; 1961 purchased by Stephens, Sutton and renamed “**Rookley**”, in 1963 sold to Carrington Nav. Co, Hong Kong (John Manners Group) and renamed “**London Breeze**”, 1970 sold for further trading.



(unknown photographer)

Above – “**Ripley**” Built 1953, 5843 GRT. In 1963, after only ten years with the company she was sold to Cambay Prince SS Co, Hong Kong (John Manners Group) and renamed “**Thames Breeze**” seen here whilst under charter to others



The “**Ripley**” photographed whilst still under Stephen, Sutton’s Management. A typical classic British post war tramp, “**Ripley**” was acquired by John Manners in 1963 and renamed “**Thames Breeze**”. She met a sad demise when she grounded on Investigator Reef in the South China Sea during the late 1960s and became a total constructive loss.

(unknown photographer)



#### **MV Ripley (1963 renamed “Thames Breeze”)**

Wrecked in 09.40N / 113.01E in the eastern part of the Spratly Group on a passage Shanghai to Colombo with a cargo of rice. The wreck site is about 140 NM southwest of the island of Palawan and 132 NM northwest of, what was then named, the island of Borneo.

(unknown photographer)

End

References: Stephens, Sutton & Co. public archives

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