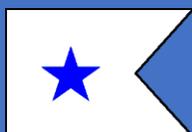


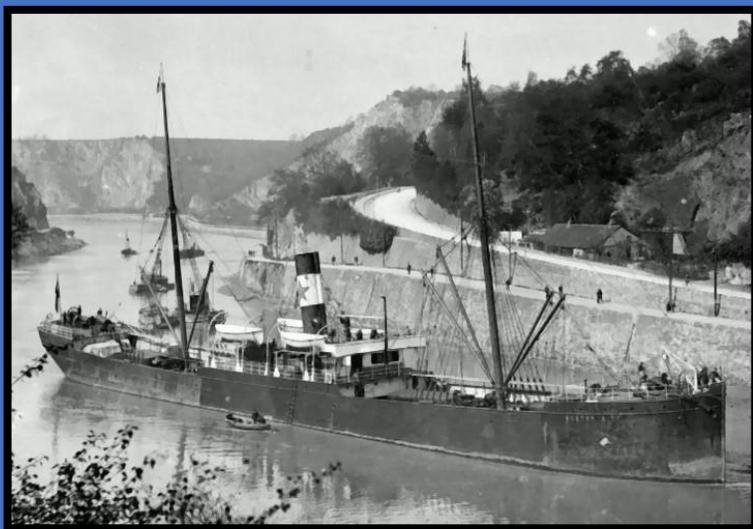
Bristol City Line of Steamships Ltd – Charles Hill

By Geoff Walker



Bristol City Line was part of a company with shipping, shipbuilding and ship repairing interests that started in the 18th century. The founder was Charles Hill, who took over the Hillhouse business from his partner, George Hillhouse, in 1845 and changed the name to Messrs. Charles Hill & Sons. Thereafter the company became affectionately known as “Charlie Hills” amongst employees of the **Bristol City Line**.

The Hillhouse firm had been started in 1704 - commencing at first in support of the notorious Slave Trade, later they became “Privateers” or quasi licensed Pirates of the Realm, during the Seven Years War with France. The company later engaged in more respectable and traditional shipping business, trading to the West Indies, and by the 1860s, extending services to India and beyond to Australia. **The Bristol City Line of Steamships Limited** was managed by Charles Hill & Sons., which is a branch of what is claimed to be the oldest shipping company in the world, which reportedly continuous to existe to the present day.



The original “**SS Bristol City**” built in 1887. This was the first **Bristol City Line** ship to sail to New York in December 1880, unfortunately, she was lost.

By 1872 the company owned 16 vessels and **The Bristol City Line** was formed in 1879 to run the new steamships that were being built at the time, carrying cargo to New York. A name convention was established whereby, each ship’s name would end with the name “**City**”.

During the early years of entering the Atlantic trade, to the East coast of America, the **Bristol City Line** was plagued with misfortune. Between the inauguration of their American service in 1880 and 1904, they suffered no fewer than 7 ships lost, due to foundering, ice, or collision with other vessels.

The company also built ships, at Albion Docks at Bristol, but this part of the company suffered from reduced demand for new ships during the early 1900s, due partially to the transition from sail to steam, with many a shipowner still “treading water” when it came to the recent technical advances of steamships, until fully proven. The shipbuilding part of the business made a recovery during WW1 when there was a natural surge in demand for new tonnage.

Bristol City Line continued to trade on the East coast of the USA and started a service to Canada in 1933, extending this to the Great Lakes in 1958, to include the Canadian and U.S. Lakes as far as Chicago.



MV Halifax City, delivered to **Bristol City Line** in 1964. Built by Burntisland Ship Building Company, Fife. Grt 6533 tons with a service speed of 16 knots.

Sold to Thai Maritime Navigation Co. Ltd., in 1972 and renamed “**Nakornton**”, she continued trading until 1986 when sent for demolition at Bangkok.

In 1969, a consortium comprised of **Compagnie Maritime Belge (CMB)**, **Charles Hill of Bristol**, (owners of the **Bristol City Line**) and **Clarke Traffic Services Ltd.**, from **Montreal, Quebec**, was formed and inaugurated services under the name of **Dart Containerline Co. Ltd.**, to encompass a service between Antwerp and Southampton to Halifax, New York, and Norfolk. With their foresight, they became one of the pioneering container operators. The company was registered in Hamilton Bermuda.



MV Montreal City, also built by Burntisland Shipbuilders, Fife, in 1963 for **Bristol City Line** of Steamships Ltd., Grt 6502 tons, with a service speed of 15 knots.

Sold for further trading to Thai Maritime Navigation Co. Ltd., in 1972 and renamed “**Ratchaburi**”. A major fire broke out in the cargo on 24 March 1973 while loading 2,500 tons of rubber from a lighter in Pattani Bay, Southern Thailand. With the fire out of control,

the vessel was abandoned, which required the crew swimming about one mile to the shore. A Thai navy patrol boat fired shells into the hull of the stricken ship to make her sink and extinguish the fire. The

scuttling took place at position 6° 57' 15" N 101° 14' 15" E on 25 March 1973. She subsequently sank in about 10m of water. She had initially been on a voyage from Bangkok to Japan with a cargo of jute and rubber.



The very streamlined vessel "**MV Toronto City**" built by Doxford shipbuilders, Sunderland, in 1966. Grt 7643. Fitted with 6 Cylinder Sulzer 2SA diesel engine developing 9600 BHP and giving a service speed of 17 knots. This ship changed ownership to Bibby Bulk Carriers Ltd. when the take-over took place during 1971. However, her tenure was to be short lived, because in 1972 she was sold, her name being changed to **Ilkon Polly** and owner to Brandts Sg Liberia Ltd. There then followed, several

other name and ownership changes until 1985, when she met her demise at shipbreakers at Sachana in Gujarat, India.



The fine looking 1963 built, CMB cargo liner "**Breughel**" an early participant in the Dart Containerline service to the USA. A good example of ex cargo ships being used for containers during the early 1970s before full containerization became the norm. The ship was eventually sold to Far East interests, ending up as the "**Tamaki**" prior to being sent for

demolition in China.

Initially, the consortium deployed three chartered German container ships to Halifax, plus four 18,000-ton painter-class ships, including **Breughel**, which had been launched in 1963 and operated by CMB, to US ports. The purpose-built vessels operated by the consortium included the 31,036-ton **MV Dart America**, owned by **Clarke** and launched in 1970, and her sister ship **MV Dart Atlantic**, owned by **Bristol City Line** and launched in 1971. Both these vessels were later owned by the **Bibby Line**, as part of the acquisition of **Bristol City Line** in 1971. Bibby later sold its share in Dart Containerline to **Orient Overseas Container Line**, which took over the **Clarke** shareholding in 1973. The third ship, **MV Dart Europe**, was owned by CMB.

The consortium ceased operating in 1981, when the St Lawrence Coordinated Service was formed by Orient Overseas Container Line, Compagnie Maritime Belge, and CP Ships. The port call at Halifax was dropped for the Canadian service in preference to Montreal, while a separate service was established to the US. The **Dart America** became the **Manchester Challenge**, the **Dart Atlantic** the **CP Ambassador**, and the **Dart Europe** the **CMB Europe**, while a fourth ship was added as the **Canadian Explorer**. In 1983, **Orient Overseas Lines** took over the entire US service, under which name it operates to today. In Canada, the successors are **Orient Overseas Container Line**, and Germany's **Hapag-Lloyd** shipping group, which took over CP Ships in 2007.

The orange hull being the final legacy of **Bristol City Line** – the 1971 built **MV Dart Atlantic** delivered to **Bibby Line** following their takeover of **Bristol City Line** the same year. She was built for the new consortium (of which Bibby was part at that time) **Dart Containerline Ltd.**



Built in 1971 by Swan Hunter and Tyne Shipbuilders. Grt 31036. Fitted with Sulzer @SA 10 Cylinder Diesel developing 29,000 BHP giving a service speed of 21 knots. With the absorption of **Bristol City Line** into **Bibby Line** the vessel was employed on the **Dart Containerline Service** to North America. In 1986 her name was changed to "**Canmar Ambassador**", she finally met her demise at Alang in 1995.

A final demise to a long-established Bristol shipping icon came when in 1980, Bristol City Council closed the floating harbour at Bristol, and shipbuilding ended in Albion Dock. The shipbuilder **Charles Hill of Bristol PLC** was taken over in 1981.

End

References: Bristol City Line Archives, Allen Collection, various online data available in the Public Domain, from which some material has been sourced.

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