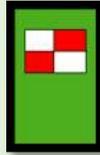


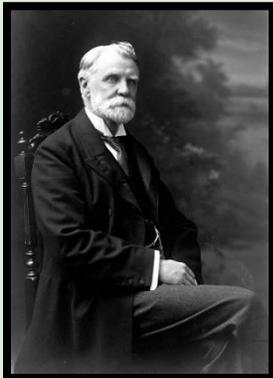
Sir R. Ropner & Co.,

Pool Shipping Co. and Ropner Shipping Co.

Review by Geoff Walker



Mariners may recall, many a mess-deck joke made in jest about “Ropners” claiming the “U” flag funnel emblem, was a warning to unwary seafarers, signifying “that you are standing into danger”- in accordance with the International Code of Signals. This was totally unjustified because the company was highly regarded by its employees and classified as a very decent and caring company for which to work.



Founded in 1874 by **Robert Ropner** of Hartlepool, the company operated one of the largest fleets of tramp ships under the British flag. The group consisted of two main subsidiary companies which came under **Sir R. Ropner & Co.**, they were the **Pool Shipping Co.** and **Ropner Shipping Co.**

Robert Ropner (Left) was born in Germany in 1838. As a young boy he ran away from home, stowing away on a ship sailing from Hamburg to West Hartlepool, where he started work as a clerk. The story goes that, at the age of 19, Robert Ropner and a friend of his, decided to seek their fortunes in Australia. Upon their arrival at the dock in Hamburg, only one job was found to be available on a ship bound for Australia. His friend took passage to Australia, and instead a twist of fate brought young Ropner to Hartlepool, instead.

In 1866 he obtained employment with T. Appleby & Co., and in 1866 was fortunate to be taken into partnership in **Appleby, Ropner & Co.**, ship-owners, shipbrokers, and coal exporters. This lasted until 1874 when the partnership was dissolved. So, **Robert Ropner** established his own business.

He commenced by chartering 5 of his previous partnership’s jointly owned ships. These were coasters and short-seas traders but Ropner quickly moved into larger, ocean-going tramp steamers, and by 1884 he had built a fleet of 19 vessels. To further broaden his thriving company, in 1887 he purchased the Stockton shipyard of M. Pearse, making him one of the very few British tramp ship owners to also own a shipyard.

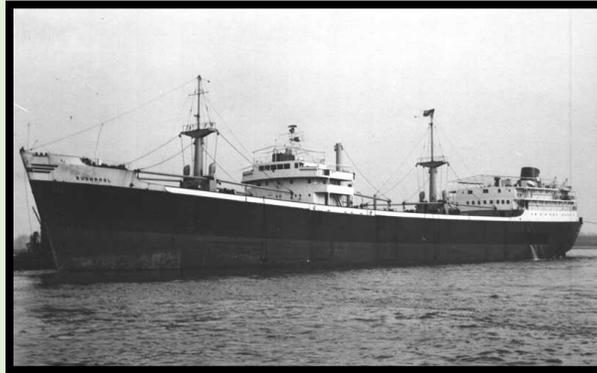
In 1900 **Robert Ropner** moved into politics and was successfully elected as the MP for Stockton-on-Tees; a seat which he held until 1910. In 1904 he was made a Baronet and became Sir Robert Ropner. By 1911 his fleet had further expanded to 41 steamers owned by **R. Ropner & Co. Ltd**, and an additional 9 ships owned by his **Pool Shipping Co. Ltd**, making it the largest tramp fleet of its time in the United Kingdom.

All, of the vessels belonging to the Ropner owned ships, carried names ending in '**by**' while the Pool owned ships had names ending in 'pool'.

During WW1, the Ropner companies suffered severely, losing 29 ships, whilst their offices at Hartlepool were damaged in December 1914 during the bombardment of the town by German battlecruisers and later in the war during a Zeppelin air raid. The company's ships did however succeed in sinking one U-boat and damaging another during hostilities. This aggressive reaction towards attacking U-boats, was repeated again during WW2, earning the company the nickname of '**Ropner's Navy**'.

The total fleet had been reduced to 23 by 1921 and sadly Sir Robert Ropner died in 1924. The shipyard was also closed in 1924, but the traditional 'coal out / grain back' trade in which the company had been engaged for so many years, enabled the company to survive through the Depression.

In the mid-late 1930s fleet expansion resumed. The '**Clearpool**' becoming the company's first steam turbine ship; designed to the higher standards needed for chartering into the liner trades, and in 1936 the company took delivery of its first motorship, '**Moorby**', but **Ropner** also continued to add steamers to the fleet.



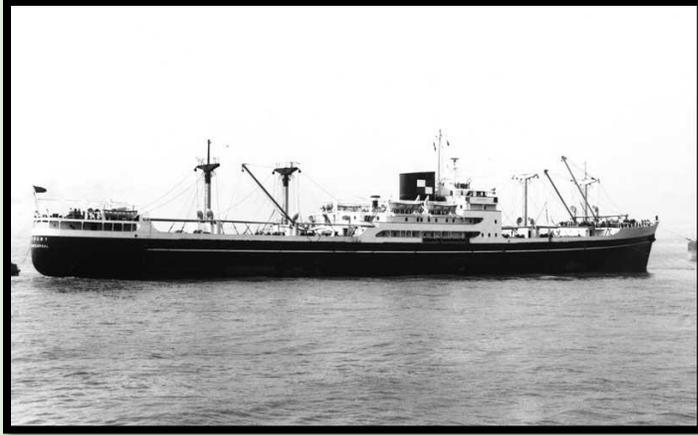
A member of the Pool Shipping Company – **MV Rushpool**.

At the outbreak of WW2, the combined fleet had been rebuilt to 48 vessels, and the Ministry of War Transport (MOWT) placed a further 52 vessels under **Ropner's** management. During WW2 **Ropner** again suffered serious losses, with a total of 33 ships being sunk due to enemy action.

The company traditionally painted the hull of their ships dark green, and their funnel insignia was the red and white "U" flag on a dark green background, some of their fleet had the ship's name painted in large letters on the ship's sides. Hence, his ships became easily recognizable.

In a major financial reorganization in 1948, **Ropner Shipping Co Ltd** and **Pool Shipping Co Ltd** were placed in the ownership of **Ropner Holdings Ltd** and that company was floated on the stock exchange. The group's headquarters was moved to Darlington and **Sir R Ropner & Co (Management) Ltd** formed.

The fleet was rebuilt after WW2 but to a more modest level, with some diversification into tankers and bulk carriers. In 1954 **Ropner** inaugurated a regular service from Glasgow to the Gulf, but this was



abandoned after a year. At the end of the 1950s, the fleet consisted of 18 vessels. The last steamer was sold in 1960.

Left, the handsome looking **MV Somersby** of the **Ropner Company**.

Ropner continued in business as both ship owners and managers until 1997, when taken over by Jacobs Holdings plc. In 2000 the company relocated to Dartford and became a unit of Bidcorp Shipping Division which was rebranded

as **Dartline Ltd.**, in 2005. From 1st March 2006, **Ropner Ship Management** ceased to trade as a ship management company.

So, unfortunately the demise of another traditional British tramp ship operator was recorded for posterity. The sad loss of a company that had done so much for the British shipping industry, but like many others who succumbed to the same fate, it was only a matter of time as a consequence of all the changes and influences that took place within the industry during the 70-80s, many beyond their control, that started to impact the traditional shipowner and signal their end.



MV Thornaby – looking somewhat deserted. Most likely during a period of layup going by both anchors deployed and kinked as well.

End

References: Robert Ropner company archives, Allen collection and online data readily available on the Public Domain.

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