BANK LINE’S rapid build programme.

50 British built ships in 10 years…

Laganbank caption: The M.V. Laganbank, one of Harland’s 1955 built ships showing her classic lines.

Post WW2, the Bank Line embarked on a massive building programme, and one which only peaked in the 1970’s. Looking back over 50 years later, it seems even more remarkable that all those vessels came from British yards, namely, Harland and Wolf in Belfast, William Doxford in Sunderland, and Messrs Swan Hunter on Tyneside. Those were the days of British shipping successes. In 10 years, from 1957 to 1967, no less than 50 new vessels were launched for the Bank Line, often without much of a ceremony, and it is a tribute to the Owners, managers, and staff that these vessels could be absorbed so readily and gainfully into the worldwide fleet. It was a staggering achievement by the yards and included a steady improvement in design and features as the years passed. By contrast, it seems almost bizarre that today, not only the building yards, but the Merchant Navy itself has shrunk beyond any significant presence.
The design of the Bank Line ships, so crucial to success, was altered year on year as the needs of the trade became clearer, but it was a moving target, some would say a blurred target, as the traditional break bulk cargoes reduced in volume bit by bit, and shippers started demanding boxes. In the traditional U.S. Gulf loading ports, shippers were starting to express a preference for 40 ft. containers which swiftly exacerbated the problem.

Within the fleet in these heady years of expansion, a competent deck officer could look forward to an early command, after just a few voyages in the Chief Officer position, and barely 30 years old. There was also a good chance in the first few years of command of being asked to take out a brand new vessel from the building yard, something rather special in a normal career. It was a great attraction, and helped to retain Officers in a company where signing on for 2 years was still the rule. After all, wives and girl friends ashore were always competing for loyalty and affection!

1957 / 67 - NEW BRITISH BUILT VESSELS FOR THE BANK LINE.

1957 Doxford - Firbank, Riverbank, Northbank, TESTBANK PICTURE
The Doxford series were 13 open shelter-decked vessels of 10,400 tons, with 8 delivered as closed shelterdeck, raising the deadweight to 12,100. There was little thought of container trades at the conception, so the ship lines were classic three hatches forward, and two aft, giving a pleasing profile to traditionalists. Similarly, the Harland built vessels, commencing with the Cloverbank consisted of 12 open shelterdeck types and 5 closed, giving a deadweight of 10,200 and 12,200 tons respectively. So much alike were the designs with Doxford built vessels, that no
obvious differences were seen by a casual observer. The funnel design was one clue, but not until later series when Doxford funnels took on a more slinky appearance. In the later series, the funnel and radar mast all merged into the bridge accommodation in a distinct departure from classic lines.

1958
Doxford - Birchbank, Streambank, Teakbank
Harlands - Dartbank, Garrybank, Minchbank

1959
Doxford - Wavebank, Yewbank,
Harlands - Rosebank, Ashbank, Pinebank

1960
Doxford - Willowbank,
Harlands - Elmbank

1961
Doxford - Larchbank, Lindenbank, Weirbank, Testbank
Harlands - Avonbank, Levernbank

1962
Doxford - Inverbank, Forresbank, Trentbank
Harlands - Springbank, Olivebank
Swan Hunter - Speybank, Marabank  SPEYBANK PICTURE

1963
Doxford - Oakbank, Rowenbank, Laurelbank, Taybank.

TWEEDBANK PICTURE.  CAPTION: M.V.TWEEDBANK, ONE OF FOUR 15,000 DWT VESSELS, AND DELIVERED IN 1964 FROM WM DOXFORD IN SUNDERLAND.
Harlands - Lossiebank, Roybank

1964
Doxford - Hollybank, Sprucebank, Tweedbank,
Harlands - Weybank, Hazelbank, Irisbank

IRISBANK PICTURE
1965
Doxford - Beechbank, Ernebank,

1966
Doxford - Shirrabank
Harlands - Nairnbank

1967
Doxford - Teviotbank,
Harlands - Maplebank.

In total, some 75 ships were built over a 20 year period. Bank Line already had a history of building a rapid series of ships, and the inter war years had seen a similar picture. There was also an early faith in the Doxford oil engine, and also the opposed piston arrangement. This came with advantages and some disadvantages, but trial and error saw a gradual and satisfactory improvement.
When Andrew Weir was in his prime in the early 1920’s, and eagerly forging ahead, he placed an order with Messrs Harland & Wolff Ltd for 18 ships. Some of these were built at their Goven yard on the Clyde to spread the work. They were all twin screw vessels giving a good turn of speed of 14 knots, and presumably worth the additional cost of spares and maintenance which two engines entailed. No less than 9 of these ships were lost in WW2, and another wrecked, but those that survived all put in over 30 years service, and could be seen in ports around the world, toiling away with steam winches and lattice type derricks into the 1950’s. The vessels were named :Inverbank, Glenbank, Birchbank, Cedarbank, Comliebank, Clydebank, Alynbank, Elmbank, Forresbank, Nairnbank, Weirbank, Larchbank, Myrtlebank, Levernbank, Olivebank, Oakbank, Speybank and Springbank. Not particularly handsome, but they were the backbone of the Bank Line fleet between the wars, and one, the Myrtlebank stayed in the fleet for 35 years before going to the scrapyard in Hong Kong.

PICTURE COMLIEBANK. Caption: Twin screw M.V. Comliebank that gave 30 years service trading worldwide.

Fast forward to the 1950’s. The steady parade of new vessels meant that the old timers could finally be phased out of the fleet, and the war built ships went with them.

They had given valuable service and provided much needed capacity. Andrew Weir (later Lord Inverforth) had recently passed on at the age of 90, but his unique global network of Agents,
trades, and established routes took up the challenge readily. Soon, the shiny new hulls could be seen in ports around the globe. They were aided by a very able chartering department who joined up the dots of regular and time honoured routes by spot charters when needed. The term ‘tramping’ is often used in connection with Bank Line activities but the true story is much more sophisticated. A glance at the sailing schedules and the advertising of the day showed a bewildering commitment to regular lines, even to employees of the company! A magnificent ‘spider’s web’ of routes encompassed the globe. The House Magazine carried a list of ships under the heading “Where are they now?” and they might well have asked! The list is too long and comprehensive to reproduce here, but a sample from the 1970’s gives an idea.

SHIP MOVEMENT LIST HERE

Fast arriving new vessels bolstered the fleet, and for a number of years, the total number of ships employed at any one time was maintained at around the 50 mark. There were losses, some occasioned by the unique Pacific Island hopping nature of the Bank Line trades. Post war the Liberty “Kelvinbank” stranded on Ocean island, and the Southbank, and Lindenbank succumbed to the trickery of the Line Islands. Also in the Pacific, but on the Peruvian Coast, the Levernbank stranded, and the “Trentbank” was lost in a collision. A couple of vessels stranded but escaped the coral clutches, the Maplebank in Fiji, and the Beaverbank again at Fanning Island. An older vessel, the M.V. Westbank grounded on another island, Juan De Nova in the Mozambique channel, but was dragged off successfully.

The last ‘Liberty’ type vessel left the fleet in 1960, and this new sized fleet allowed for a vessel to be on call pretty much anywhere around the world with a few days notice, a feature which was a speciality of the Bank Line service, and it paid handsome dividends.
Not far away however, loomed the spectre of containerisation, and as with most Boards governing British shipping, there was an endless debate about ordering the correct tonnage for the era and the traditional trades. For many companies involved in ‘produce’ cargoes homewards, the challenge was particularly difficult. It applied not only to Bank Line but to companies like Elder Dempster and Palm Line heavily committed to the West African trade, with manufactured goods outwards, and logs and produce homeward.
On the positive side, new ships meant an opportunity to adapt. There was an internal struggle to deliver designs for the trades on offer, and the shipyards had their own design ideas and suggestions. At the heart of the company trades, was a valuable route delivering Pacific Island produce, Copra and coconut oil, to the UK and Europe. Palm oil also began to be carried. This called for a significant deeptank capacity on the ships in addition to a high cubic presence. As containers rapidly grew in popularity with shippers, it presented what was probably an insurmountable challenge, namely how to carry containers e.g. to Australasia, and return with island produce, bearing in mind that empty containers had to be returned, or deadheaded, in container speak. Valiant efforts were made, including a joint venture with Shaw Savill, but history shows that the experiment slowly failed. The switch to part container carrying was a painful and expensive exercise.

Today, when a traditional Bank Line ship is featured on the nostalgia shipping sites online, there are usually comments along the lines of, “That was when ships looked like ships!”.

Hollybank Caption:
M.V.Hollybank, a 12,190 ton deadweight vessel of the ‘Firbank’ class.

The continuous improvement in design and the additional features over the span of the years, meant vessels became longer and the deadweight capacity increased. Twin hatches came in to facilitate the carriage of deck containers, electric cranes were fitted along
with steel sliding hatches. Winches finally were situated on masthouses up off of the deck, something which the seagoing staff had been asking for over the years. Engines had more power and the advent of the Doxford ‘J’ class engine in 19… giving out 10,800HP on six cylinders raised the service speed to 17 knots. The Shirrabanbank and the Teviotbank were the first vessels in the fleet to have these engines.

It should be mentioned that pricing, as always, was a key factor in placing new orders. The yards, themselves nearly always under threat, and struggling for stability in a difficult market, often gave out keen pricing to attract orders, and the Bank Line were quick to accept. An example was the order for 2 vessels from the Swan Hunter Group, the Speybank and the Marabank, built in 1962 and 1963 respectively. A standard design from Swan Hunter had been named the ‘Efficiency class’, and when this failed to attract orders, some of the features were retained and used in the design of these two new Bank Line vessels. Apart from Bi-pod masts, a striking feature was the incorporation of the funnel into the bridge structure, something which turned out to be something of a problem. Fumes proved to be a continuing nuisance in the accommodation.

Corabank Caption: The purpose designed M.V. Corabank, one of six vessels for the Pacific trade.

Swan Hunter were later to build six ‘Corabank’ class vessels, the first being delivered in 1973. By his time the design was moving
away from the traditional accommodation amidships profile so loved by traditionalists, and the new sleek design allowed for 4 hatches ahead of the bridge - the so called three quarters aft design. Another important feature was the 11 oil tanks designed for the Pacific Islands trade. These ships also were designed for a total of 240 twenty foot containers. It was an effort to meet the container challenge head on, whilst retaining enough flexibility for the traditional needs, but it met with limited success. The twin hatches at numbers 3 and 4 holds had associated electric deck cranes. Some years later three of the class would have four double berth cabins added. Possibly because of the Pacific Island routing, they proved to be extremely popular.

The comprehensive nature of Bank Line’s worldwide coverage can be seen in this pre war advertisement.

ANDREW WEIR ADVERTISEMENT HERE

Shirrabank Caption: M.V. Shirrabank, built by Wm Doxford in 1966 - larger Deadweight at 15,150 tons and 528ft long.

The fleet continued on into the 80’s and 90’s, but several events marked the decline and eventual demise of this once iconic
company. Some blamed the container ‘tsunami’ of the 70’s, and this did play a big part. Changes at the helm also occurred resulting from the death of Lord Inverforth in 1955, and his son later in 19?? Tragedy struck when the grandson, …… had an early death on his 50th birthday in 1981. An appetite for the shipping business then waned markedly, and other interests and acquisitions took an increasing amount of time.

Looking back from the vantage point of the 21st century, it is apparent what a stunning success the Bank Line was for over 100 years. The short period which is the focus of this article contains one of the most prolific building programmes in recent British shipping. It is a piece of maritime history to be proud of.
ANDREW WEIR & CO
SHIPOWNERS,
TANK STEAMER OWNERS, SHIP AND INSURANCE BROKERS AND
MERCHANTS.

THE BANK LINE LTD.

OPERATING THE FOLLOWING SERVICES:

AMERICAN & INDIAN LINE.—Calcutta, Chittagong, Rangoon,

AMERICAN & INDIAN BRANCH SERVICE.—Rangoon, Chittagong,
Madras, Madras Coast, Colombo and Malabar Coast (filling up if neces-
sary at Aden and Port Sudan) to Boston, New York and Philadelphia.

AMERICAN & ORIENTAL LINE.—New York to Straits Settlements,
Hong Kong, Philippines, China and Japan and vice versa.

AMERICAN & RIO PLATA LINE.—New York to Monte Video, Buenos
Aires, Rosario and Bahia Blanca.

BOMBAY AMERICAN LINE.—Bombay to New York and Philadelphia.

CALCUTTA TO RIVER PLATE PORTS.—Calcutta to Monte Video
Buenos Aires, Rosario and Bahia Blanca.

INDIAN AFRICAN LINE.—Carrying passengers and cargo, including in
its itinerary Rangoon, Calcutta, Colombo, Beira, Delagoa Bay, Durban,
East London, Port Elizabeth, Mossel Bay and Cape Town.

INDIAN CHILIAN LINE.—Calcutta, Rangoon and Singapore to West
Coast of South American Ports.

ORIENTAL AFRICAN LINE.—Carrying passengers and cargo from
Hong Kong, Bangkok, Singapore to Mauritius, Delagoa Bay, Durban,
East London, Port Elizabeth, Mossel Bay and Cape Town and vice versa.
Taking cargo on through Bill of Lading from Japan and China.

PERSIAN GULF.—General Merchants, Export and Import. Frequent
Sailings from Busheh and Bushire to U.K. and Continent.

REGULAR RIVER SERVICE between Bagdad and Bushire.

REGULAR SAILINGS from AUSTRALIA to CHILE.

REGULAR SAILINGS from AUSTRALIA to JAVA.

REGULAR SAILINGS from AUSTRALIA to PERU.

For Freight and Particulars apply to—

ANDREW WEIR & CO

For Freight and Particulars apply to—