

Austasia Line Ltd.

(Vesty Group)

By Geoff Walker



Those mariners that regularly called at Singapore and Australian Ports during the 1960s and early 1970s would almost certainly have come across those graceful ships with a large black “A”, captured within a black circle, on a white funnel with black top. Of course, the **Austasia Line Ltd**, which was part of the Lord Vesty, and Blue Star Line Group of companies.

Austasia Line Ltd. was formed in 1952, when offices were established in Singapore, which was to become its main operating base, with the view to their ships providing regular services from Singapore to Malaysian, and Australian ports, with intermediate calls at Port Moresby and Indonesian ports.

Booth Line's new building, the “**Clement**” became the “**Malay**”, initiating the service. Built by William Pickersgill & Sons Ltd., Sunderland, and ordered as “**Clement**” for Booth Line, but the contract was taken over by Blue Star Line who renamed the ship “**Malay Star**”. In 1953 ownership was transferred while fitting out, to **Austasia Line Ltd** and renamed “**Malay**”, 1964 renamed “**Mahsuri**”, then in 1966 transferred back to Booth Line and renamed “**Benedict**”. In 1967 the ship was chartered to Lamport & Holt and renamed “**Renoir**”, 1971 sold to Panama interests and renamed “**Diamond Star**”, 1973 sent for demolition.



Austasia Line's 1953 built “**Mahsuri**”, which after being laid down as “**Clement**” for Booth Line had been launched as “**Malay Star**” and delivered as “**Malay**” and went to **Austasia Line Ltd.**, as their first vessel to enter the new service between Singapore and Australia. In 1964 she was renamed “**Mahsuri**”. The ship had an interesting career, being transferred between the various Group entities.

(Malcolm Cranfield)



In 1966 the “**MV Mahsuri**” was transferred back to Booth Line and renamed **Benedict (3)**, she was then placed under time charter to Lamport and Holt, who renamed her “**Renoir**”. In 1971 she was sold to Panama interests and renamed “**Diamond Star**”. After a short layup at Kaohsiung during 1973, she moved to Suao, Taiwan, and was broken up there.

(Unknown photographer)

Above, the “**MV Renoir**” (ex-Clement, Malay Star, ex-Malay, ex-Mahsuri) in Lamport and Holt’s colors, whilst under their charter from Booth Line.



(Unknown Photographer)

The “**Malaysia**” of the **Austasia Line Ltd.**, prior to having her hull painted grey. Built in 1954 by Cammell Laird & Co.Ltd, at Birkenhead for the **Booth Line** (which was part of the Vestey Group) as “**SS Hubert**”. She had a GRT of 8062 tons, service speed of 14 knots and was fitted to accommodate 70 First Class and 92 Tourist Class passengers.

Her service continued, but like so many services and with newer and more modern and larger passenger ship competing, the “**Hubert**” ceased to be a profitable proposition, and there were other markets where she could be better utilized within the greater Vestey Bros Shipping Group. Thus by 1964 she was withdrawn and placed on charter to one of their subsidiaries in Asia, being the **Austasia Line Ltd.**

When the **Austasia Line** initially chartered the “**SS Hubert**” in 1964 they renamed her “**Malaysia**”. She departed from Melbourne on her inaugural, **Austasia Line** voyage, in early February. Her maiden sailing took her from Melbourne to Sydney, Brisbane, Port Moresby, Singapore, Malacca, Penang, and Port Swettenham, after which she returned directly to Singapore. She then entered her regular

passenger/cargo service to Melbourne via Port Moresby, Brisbane, and Sydney. Later Jakarta was added to the list of ports of call.



The **SS Malaysia** (previously "**Hubert**" of the Booth Line) captured at a Keppel shipyard wharf in Singapore ca 1970, whilst undergoing repairs.

The "**SS Malaysia**" became a popular ship on this Asia Australasia route, so much so, that she was joined by the somewhat more attractive liner that was to enter the fleet in 1963 and become known as "**MV Australasia**".

(Unknown Photographer)

The "**SS Hildebrand**" also built by Cammell Laird, earlier in 1951, was of similar specifications and appearance as the later "**Hubert**", but was sadly lost some years later, on 25 September 25, 1957, sailing from Liverpool to Lisbon with some 164 passengers on board, she suddenly ran aground during some thick fog at Cascais Point as she was entering Lisbon. Attempts to refloat her were made over the ensuing 3 days, however the attempts were unsuccessful, and she was declared a "total constructive loss", on the 28th. Fortunately, there were no casualties amongst passengers and crew.



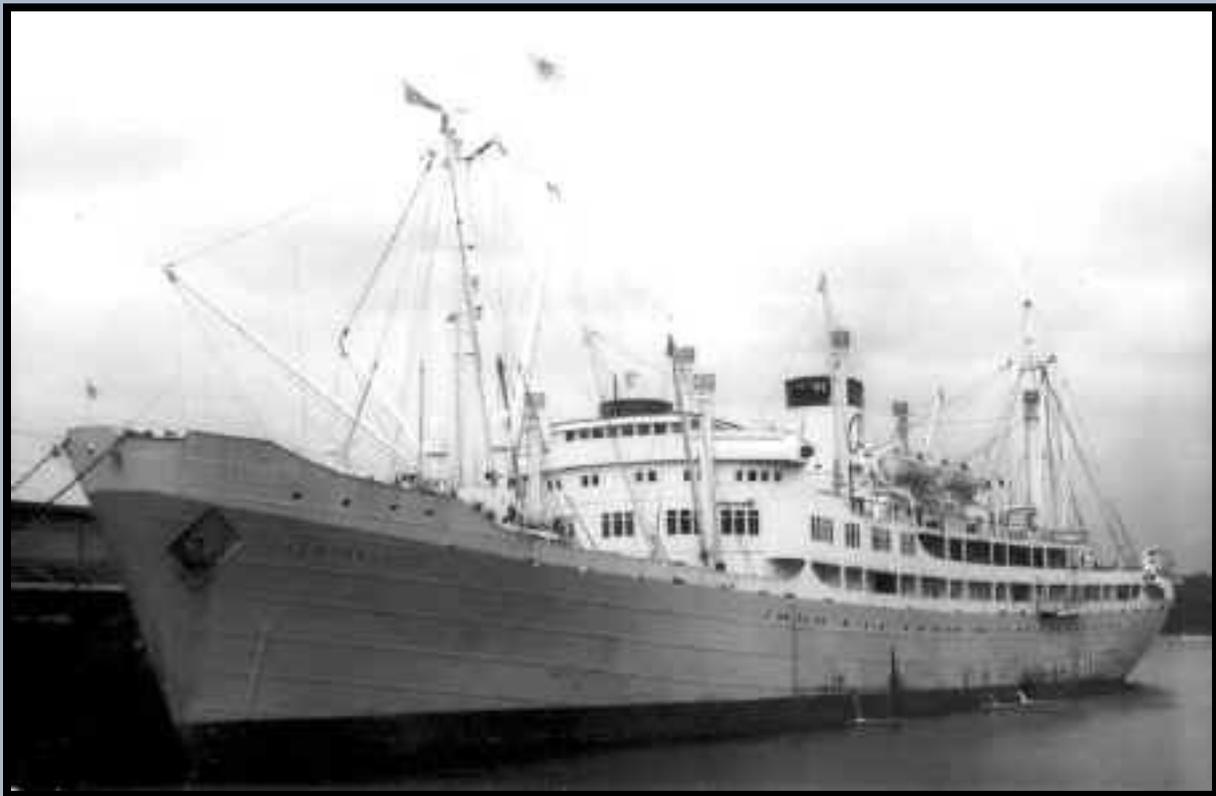
(Shipping Today and Yesterday Collection)

The ill-fated "**SS Hildebrand**" firmly aground at Cascais Point, Lisbon

About a year after the inaugural service the "**MV Australasia**" joined the **Austasia Line** fleet. She was also an ex- Booth Line, r the "**MV Anselm**", originally built as the Belgium passenger cargo liner "**MV Baudouinville**" in 1950. She commenced her maiden voyage for the service from Melbourne, in January 1966.



The ex-Booth Line vessel “**MV Anselm**”, still in her Booth Line livery. She was to later join the **Austasia Line** fleet. Initially transferred from Booth Line and renamed the **Iberia Star** under the Blue Star Line on the South America run. She was later transferred to the Singapore based **Austasia Line** and renamed “**MV Australasia**”, in 1963 . She had been the largest vessel operated by Booth Line. She was finally sent for demolition in 1973. (Malcolm Cranfield)



(Unknown Photographer)

The elegant “**MV Australasia**” seen in her **Austasia Line** colors.

In 1972 the “**MV Australasia**” was sold, and the “**SS Malaysia**” was transferred in December to the Fremantle service as the competition on the east coast of Australia had become formidable, with so many superior passenger cargo ships in operation, most being one class and by far more luxurious!

The “**SS Malaysia**” Australian service continued for a good twelve years, but she was finally withdrawn in 1976 due to a series of market changes, including the ever-increasing impact to passenger traffic by air travel which had developed rapidly, with cheap fares. Also, big changes were also happening in the sphere of containerization. Thus, new, and later generation ships were required that could carry containers more readily and competitively. Hence, in 1993 the **Austasia Line** service was wholly integrated into the **Blue Star Line** and the name of **Austasia Line** disappeared into the nostalgic fog of history!

However, the end of the “**SS Malaysia**” came when she departed Fremantle for the very last time, in May 1976, bound to Singapore, where she was to undergo conversion into a livestock carrier. The “**Malaysia**” was sold to Singaporean “Atlas Shipping Agency” who renamed her **United Challenger**. By the time the conversion had been completed she had already been renamed **SS Khalij Express**.



The ex-Malaysia seen as a sad looking sheep Carrier, following sale by **Austasia Line Ltd.** and conversion to a livestock carrier in 1976. A far cry from her glory days as the passenger cargo liner “**Hubert**”, subsequently “**Malaysia**”.

(Unknown photographer)

“**SS Khalij Express**” commenced services from Fremantle and over the next seven years she would operate from various Australian ports to load sheep and transport them to various

Middle Eastern ports. Although in 1977 she was sold to a Saudi owner, the “Arabian Maritime Transport Company, Ltd,” but she remained on the same route and retained the same name. Finally, being sent for demolition at Port Alang in 1984.



The growing influence of containerization had really started to impact worldwide trades by the very late 1970s. Two fine looking **Austasia Line** sister ships, the 1966 built **Mahsuri (3)** – ex **Tekoa** and **Mandama (2)** - ex **Taupo**, seen laying idle at Bander Abbas, are two ex-New Zealand Shipping Company vessels purchased from Strick Line (under whose banner they had been serving). One assumes the photograph was taken just prior to their delivery to **Austrasia Line** in 1980.

(Unknown photographer)

The “**Madama (2)**” was finally sent for demolition at Chittagong in 1984, whilst the “**Mahsuri (3)**” was sold to Taiwanese breakers the same year.

Over its active years, the **Austasia Line Ltd** had operated a notable fleet, totaling some 19 vessels, which made it a significant player, often naming new ships into their fleet, with the same as those earlier withdrawn, between 1952 and 1976. The **Austasia Line Ltd** will forever be remembered for the sterling passenger cargo service it provided between Singapore and Australian Ports.

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References: Booth Line Archives, Blue Star Line Archives, Lamport and Holt Archives, Austasia Line Ltd History and Records, and various online data from which some information may have been sourced.

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