

# BLUE FUNNEL'S 'P' CLASS VESSELS

Mike Dovey recounts the careers of Blue Funnel's 'P' class ships, which were a groundbreaking design in the 1960s, but which quickly became redundant when the container revolution took over world trade routes.

**T**he history of Alfred Holt's Ocean Steamship Company, trading as Blue Funnel Line, has been told many times. The company was renowned for designing and building many fine cargo ships, and operating liner

services round the world, and the Blue Funnel name is one of the most famous in the history of British shipping.

Founded in 1866, the company operated merchant ships for 122 years and was one of the UK's larger shipowning and operating companies, merging with

and taking over a variety of other companies during that time. By the 1960s the Ocean Steamship Company consisted of three companies: Glen Line (operating 15 ships), Elder Dempster (35), and Blue Funnel Line (58).

While Elder Dempster served routes to West Africa

from the UK/Continent and the USA, the other two Lines traded to the Far East and South East Asia, returning via the former Dutch colony of Indonesia, with ships that had been designed before the 1930s. The design was gradually updated, but until the mid-1960s most shipping companies saw no reason to alter either the ship design or the port handling facilities, which in many respects were largely taken for granted.

For 50 years the average size of a ship was around 8,000 gross tons, with a few exceptions of up to 10,000

► **Protesilaus** was built in Newcastle in 1967 and served the Ocean Steamship Company until 1979, when she was sold and renamed **Oriental Importer**, but she lasted only until 1985, when she was broken up at Kaohsiung.





▲ The 1967-built Prometheus (12,094grt) was powered by Burmeister & Wain engines driving a single screw, which gave her a speed of 21 knots. She was sold in 1979 to C.Y.Tung of Hong Kong and renamed Oriental Merchant. Although she was converted into a cellular containership in 1980, her demise came as soon in March 1986, when she was sold for breaking at Kaohsiung.



▲ The 1966-built Priam was completed in November 1966 and served Blue Funnel until 1979. She then had several owners in the early 1980s, all subsidiary companies of C.Y. Tung. On 18 October 1985 she was hit by an Iraqi missile when she was 60 miles north of Bahrain. She was towed to Bahrain with minor damage, and sold to Chien Yu Steel Industrial Co, Kaohsiung, for demolition. She arrived at Kaohsiung in February 1986. TREVOR JONES

gross tons, depending on the route and cargo. At 8,000gt, a ship was of a size which meant it could load and unload at most ports around the UK, and Blue Funnel ships were regular callers at ports such as Glasgow, Belfast and Liverpool to collect a cargo. This rotation usually took around three weeks, after which the ships were ready to sail for the Far East via Suez.

A visitor to Liverpool docks in 1965 would see as many as eight Blue Funnel ships in docks on either side of the Mersey. The ships would unload on the Liverpool side and cross to Birkenhead to take on cargoes, which were ready for loading. This meant that a ship could unload, move and reload faster, but still take many days to enter and leave the port.

Previously a voyage could take up to 150 days, with stops of several days at various ports. Delays in handling cargoes could further extend the time spent in port. The eight newly-designed vessels, which were 25 per cent larger than the ships they replaced, and had a correspondingly greater capacity, represented

something of a step change for Blue Funnel. They were easier to load and unload, had a greater speed, and were intended to make the system quicker and more economical.

Sadly, although these ships were more advanced than their immediate predecessors, even as they made their maiden voyages their fate was sealed, with their careers shortened by the new container ships. They were the last of their kind, and representative of the classic cargo liner now long gone.

Change came in the early 1960s, when Marshall Meek designed and built the Priam, or 'P', class vessels. These represented a revolutionary step for the company and were of a type never seen before in Ocean colours. They came into service in 1966-67: four were in Glen Line colours, loading at London, and four in Blue Funnel service, operating from Holt's home port of Liverpool to the Far East. However, with containerisation, within eight years these ships were starting to seem obsolete, although the P class ships were able to carry some containers, something which was important for subsequent owners, Barber Blue Sea Line and C.Y. Tung.

By 1969 Blue Funnel Line, along with other shipping companies in a new consortium called Overseas Containers, designed and built 'Bay' class vessels, each of



## RECOGNITION

Blue Funnel ships were instantly recognisable by their design and their stack funnels, rather than by their funnel colours. Recognising the colour of the distinctive funnel might not have been obvious, but the ships were named after characters from Greek classics.

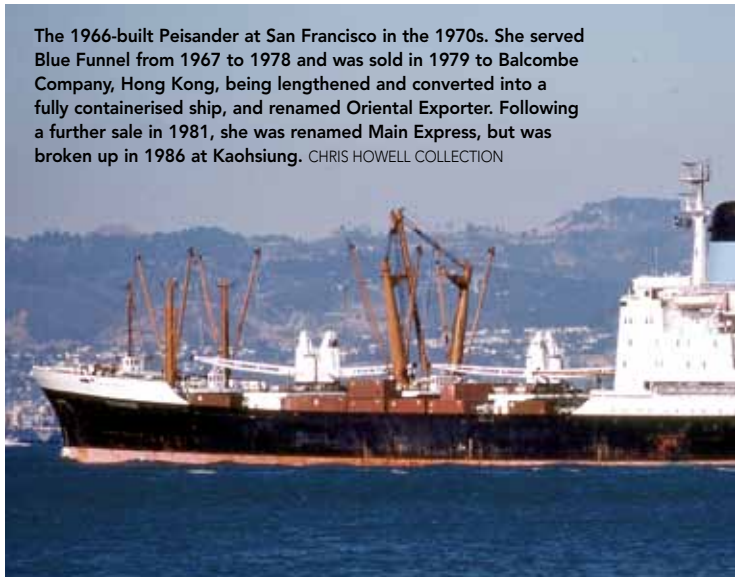
which was upwards of 50,000 gross tons, dwarfing any other ships in the fleet. No longer were ships built to be loaded and unloaded by more than 200 dockers at each port.

While the new container ships could be turned round in one day and sail again after a handful of men, a crane, and a couple of trucks had shifted their cargoes, maybe the biggest benefit to the shipping companies was that, at a

stroke, pilferage was reduced to nil, which in turn meant cheaper insurance policies.

Each of the new ships could carry the same amount that maybe ten or more conventional cargo ships would handle. Although it signalled the end for virtually shipping fleets which did not embrace the new methods, containerisation was in fact something of a gradual process. Boxboats did not take over all general cargo shipments overnight, even after the first container ships had been delivered and showed the way ahead. Indeed, full containerisation was not achieved until roughly the end of the 20th century.

In the space of a few years, the Blue Funnel fleet of well over 60 vessels was replaced by a few new container ships, resulting in a faster and more efficient service



The 1966-built Peisander at San Francisco in the 1970s. She served Blue Funnel from 1967 to 1978 and was sold in 1979 to Balcombe Company, Hong Kong, being lengthened and converted into a fully containerised ship, and renamed Oriental Exporter. Following a further sale in 1981, she was renamed Main Express, but was broken up in 1986 at Kaohsiung. CHRIS HOWELL COLLECTION

with cheaper carriage rates. Cargoes could be carried for rates significantly less than the previous ones, and consequently European markets were opened to Far East producers as never before.

To combat the now dwindling opportunities for conventional cargo ships, by 1972 all of the eight 'P' ships were assigned to Blue Funnel, and in 1973 the Ocean Steamship Company was restyled Ocean Transport & Trading Ltd. With many becoming fully containerised, new routes had to be found serving ports which did not yet have container cranes. All the ships were found work until a deal was struck so that all were put on the round-the-world

voyage service under the Blue Sea Line banner. This was a joint venture with Swedish East Asia Company (from 1974 the Barber Blue Sea Line) and was operated from the United States.

### BARBER BLUE SEA LINE

Barber Blue Sea Line joined Blue Sea Line with Barber Lines, an operation owned by Wilh Wilhelmsen based in Oslo, with Barber Steamship Company of New York acting as its US general agents. The eight vessels contributed by Blue Funnel Line were *Patroclus* (ex-*Glenalmond*), *Peisander*, *Perseus* (ex-*Radnorshire*), *Phemius* (ex-*Glenfinlas*), *Phrontis* (ex-*Pembrokeshire*), *Priam*, *Prometheus* and *Protesilaus*.

The round-the-world route involved the movement of imported goods from the Far East to US west coast ports, while goods were exported from the east coast ports to the Far East, with some of the ships calling at Australia.

The object of the service was that a ship could call at any port in the USA and the Far East when there was a need, which meant that a ship could circumnavigate the globe once, but the next time could call at entirely different ports, so no two voyages were the same. While the bigger ports were used continuously, smaller ports were used as and



▲ *Perseus*, originally *Radnorshire*, arriving at Durban in 1974. She was broken up in 1984. TREVOR JONES

▼ *Phemius*, which was built as *Glenfinlas* by John Brown, pictured arriving at Durban. TREVOR JONES





## BLUE FUNNEL 'P' CLASS SHIPS

NAME	BUILT	GT	BLUE FUNNEL	FATE
<b>PRIAM</b>	1966, Vickers Ltd, Newcastle	15,003	1966-1979	Sold 1979 to Balcombe Company, Hong Kong, lengthened, converted into a fully containerised ship, and renamed Oriental Champion
<b>PEISANDER</b>	1966, Vickers Ltd, Newcastle	15,846	1967-1978	Sold 1979 to Balcombe Company, Hong Kong, lengthened, converted into a fully containerised ship, and renamed Oriental Exporter
<b>PROMETHEUS</b>	1966, Vickers Ltd, Newcastle	14,863	1967-1979	1979: Sold to C.Y. Tung, lengthened and converted into a fully containerised ship, and renamed Oriental Merchant
<b>PROTESILAUS</b>	1967, Vickers Ltd, Newcastle	14,628	1967-1978	Sold 1979 to Balcombe Company, Hong Kong, lengthened, converted into a fully containerised ship, and renamed Oriental Importer
<b>RADNORSHIRE/ 1972- PERSEUS</b>	1967, Vickers Ltd, Newcastle	12,089	1972-1978	Sold 1978 to the China Navigation Co, Hong Kong, and renamed Kwangsi; 1982: transferred to Panama registry, and renamed Asia Dragon.
<b>GLENFINLAS/ 1972- PHEMIUS</b>	1966, John Brown & Co, Clydebank	12,094	1972-1978	Sold 1978 to the China Navigation Co (John Swire & Sons), London, and renamed Kweichow
<b>PEMBROKESHIRE/ 1972- PHRONTIS</b>	1966, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, Nagasaki (for Glen Line)	12,299	1972-1982	Sold 1982 to Gulf Shipping Lines Ltd, London, and renamed Gulf Osprey
<b>GLENALMOND/ 1973- PATROCLUS</b>	1966, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Ltd., Nagasaki (for Glen Line)	12,299	1973-1982	Sold 1982 to Rajab & Company, Saudi Arabia, and renamed Rajab 1

when there was a demand.

The actual route was straightforward. It started at Vancouver in Canada and went down the US west coast with calls at the main ports of Seattle, Tacoma, Longview, Oakland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Long Beach, San Pedro and San Diego.

The vessels would bypass Mexico and go through the Panama Canal. Once past Balboa and Cristobal, the ships would travel round the Gulf ports, such as Houston, Galveston, Beaumont, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Gulfport, Mobile, and Pensacola, before rounding Key West to head for Miami.

From there a ship would travel up the US east coast, usually calling at Jacksonville, Savannah, Charleston, Wilmington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Norfolk, Newport News, New York, Brooklyn and Boston. Leaving the USA a ship might call at Halifax and Saint John in Canada before crossing the Atlantic for Bilbao, and onwards past Gibraltar and to Barcelona. From there, it was a dash through the Suez Canal at Port Said, heading for Colombo in Sri Lanka.

From Colombo the ships would sail to Singapore, Labuan, Penang, Pelabuhan Kelang, Pelabuhan Kelang, Pelabuhan Kelang, Swettenham (formally Port Swettenham and now Port

Klang), Manila, Bangkok, and on to the Chinese mainland at Hong Kong, eventually reaching Busan, the Taiwan ports of Keelung and Kaohsiung before reaching the end of the circumference at Japan. Japanese ports of call included Yokohama, Kobe and Nagoya, after which the ships crossed the Pacific to start the whole circle again at the ports in Canada.

### CREW CHANGES

In order to operate the ships, men would be flown out to them at different ports, where crews would be changed, and one Master and his officers would fly back to the UK and an incoming Master and his officers would come take over. In most cases the rest of the crew would sail on and go ashore at the nearest port to where they lived, so Indian seaman would disembark at Colombo, and Chinese crew at Hong Kong, as they had to pay their own travel expenses so this was much cheaper than flying, especially as wages were not particularly high.

But despite Blue Funnel finding employment for their new but out-of-date 'P' class ships, by the 1980s the writing was on the wall for ships such



▲ The 1967-built Phrontis on the River Mersey on 5 April 1978. Built as Pembrokehire by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries at Nagasaki for Glen Line, she was transferred to the Ocean Steamship Company in 1972 and renamed. After leaving the Blue Funnel fleet in 1982, she was renamed Gulf Osprey, becoming Iran Ejtehad in 1983. As Dolphin VIII, she arrived at Gadani Beach for demolition on 29 April 1995. PAUL BOOT



▲ Launched as Glenalmond by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, the 1966-built Patroclus was taken over by Ocean Transport & Trading in 1973. In 1982 she was sold to Rajab & Company, Saudi Arabia, and renamed Rajab 1, but two years later she was taken o Gadani Beach for demolition, having been renamed Sahar for her final voyage. TREVOR JONES

as these. All of the vessels were withdrawn and within three years had been sold for the best possible price that could be achieved. Four of the ships were bought by C.Y. Tung of Hong Kong (who also bought *Queen Elizabeth* only to see her burn and sink in Hong Kong harbour as *Seawise University*). The cargo ships acquired by Tung were: *Priam* (which became *Oriental Champion*), *Peisander* (*Oriental Exporter*), *Protesilaus* (*Oriental Importer*) and *Prometheus* (*Oriental Merchant*).

Two others went to Middle East interests (*Phrontis* and *Patroclus*), while the last pair were sold to China Navigation (John Swire) for further trading in the Pacific, *Perseus* becoming *Kwangsi* and *Phemius* being renamed *Kweichow*. Blue Funnel Line itself came to an end in 1988, when Ocean Group withdrew from the Barber Blue Sea Service, its last shipping line.

More than three decades have passed since Blue Funnel's demise, and the latest generation of container ships dwarf the original ones, which themselves replaced conventional cargo liners. Many ships now carry upwards of 20,000 containers, making cargo carrying so cheap that imports from China and the Far East are a fraction of the cost and with faster turnarounds and voyages than in the halcyon days of the 20th century cargo liner.



Gulf Osprey, the former Phrontis, in the Houston Ship Channel, 1982-83. HARRY STOTT/DAVE SALISBURY COLLECTION

## 'POSTED AT SEA' • THE STORY OF PAQUEBOT COVERS



In philately, a paquebot cover is one mailed aboard a ship, and usually carries a paquebot postmark and/or a postmark unique to the vessel, as well as the note 'posted at sea'. Collectors of ship covers will look for different types used at different periods, as well as for covers indicating routing through particular ports.

The French word paquebot translates literally as 'ship', and the paquebot covers illustrated here were posted aboard Blue Funnel's

P class ships *Perseus*, *Phemius* and *Phrontis*. Such covers often carried the logos of the company which owned the ship from which they were posted, although this is not the case with these examples.

The Universal Postal Union created procedures for a variety of international postal regulations. Mail posted aboard a ship in international waters was entitled to be franked with stamps of, and in accordance with the postal rates of, the country of the ship's registry.

Paquebot covers are not obtained in the same way as First Day Covers and Special Handstamp covers. To obtain a post-1950 paquebot cover, a collector had to write to a ship in the hope that the Master would look on the request favourably and handle the covers by adding the ship's name to the envelopes and dropping them off at a designated port. The most helpful Masters would post a series of covers following a first request.



▲ *Phemius* after she had been renamed *Kweichow* in 1979, and when she was owned by China Navigation Co Ltd (John Swire) but on charter to Mitsui OSK Lines. KEITH WOOD



▲ *Oriental Exporter*, formerly *Peisander*, at Hong Kong in June 1979 on a voyage from Durban to Kaohsiung. ection