AHEAD OF THEIR TIME
The ships of the South American Saint Line

The South American Saint Line was founded on 22 March 1939. The founder, Richard (Dick) Street, spent his entire working life managing the company which, more than 40 years later, is still remembered for the quality of the ships it had built. In this article, Andrew Bell looks at the history of this well-known company and recalls the cargo liners that made it famous.

South American Saint Line had, in the 1930s, grown from the combined shipping ventures of George Bailey, of the Bailey shipping company serving the South Wales ports, and Dick Street's trans-Atlantic trading tramp ships. St Quentin Shipping merged with Barry Shipping to form IRS and soon established a regular trade from South Wales to Rosario in Argentina carrying, northbound, coal for the then British-owned railways and returning northbound with grain, in bulk. It was a commercial success from the spot market to limited rights in the South American Freighter Conference and the carriage of general cargo, particularly to the upper river Plate shallow draught port of Rosario. To take advantage of this commercial opening, five steamships were built by J. L. Thompsons of Sunderland. This was made possible after Dick Street won the financial support of the 8th Lord Howard de Walden and Scalford (1880-1946). Street had also by then assembled a commercial team comprising Messrs Veitch, Thornton and Ellis whose respective interests were a shipping agency in Argentina, a loading brokerage on the Continent at Antwerp, and a London shipbroker with a forwarding company.

FOUR SHIPS ORDERED
By early 1939 enough cargo was moving to establish a sound-basing sailing every ten days. To meet this demand another quarter of ships was ordered from J. L. Thompson. With twenty years of development to rely on, George Bailey adviced that the new ships be diesel engined by Duddocks. The first St Efigy was launched by the then 12-year-old Miss Marjorie Street on 23 May 1940. A handsome ship with a cargo deadweight of 9,000 tons, her delivery was extensively delayed because a replacement crankshaft, originally ordered from Czechoslovakia, became war-bound so Duddocks had to produce one locally. At a cost of £181,500, delivery was finally

effectively in September 1941. Still almost new, St Efigy was sunk as an assault ship during the Sicily landings in July 1943. So order was the vessel abandoned, that only four people out of the 401 crew were lost. Thousands of tons of ammunition blew up, spectacularly vaporising a ship whose keel had been laid with such hope.

The first St Efigy was, in common with all war-built ships, completed with a spartan finish but she had one notable feature. Although housed down aft, some of the ratings and all of the petty officers had single berth cabins. As early as March 1943, John E. Church presented a paper to the Institute of Marine Engineers which publicly revealed the projected shape of South American Saint Line's post-war newbuildings. John Church had impressed George Bailey whose company he joined in 1937, bringing with him experience of diesel engines that he had sailed with when at sea with the New Zealand Shipping Company. John Church's credibility was built on his masterly performance as South American Saint Line's principal superintendent engineer. Whereas Cyril Thomson, famously remembered for having directed the Liberty Ship, had created the first St Efigy, it was John Church who drew the general arrangement plans of what was to become the second St Efigy. As soon as a Government licence was secured, the order was placed with J. L. Thompson in late 1945 for two ships. Much of Dick Street's business flair resulted from his networking. He had originally been introduced to the Thompsons by Stanley Thompson of Silver Line. It was thus no coincidence that on adjacent berthing berths to St Efigy were the first of six ships of two types intended for Silver Line's round the world cargo passenger service. With Britain's industries hamstrung by lack of materials and power, it was not until 1947 that the new ship was launched. She was named on 15 September 1947 by Lady Howard de Walden. A sister ship, St Thomas, was sponsored by Mrs Street, followed down
the ways in March 1948, but it was St Eystyn that captured the well-deserved publicity. Lindsay Street, Dick’s son, remembers a marine superintendent of the American Moore-McCormack Line viewing the ship in Monterey Bay saying: “I have to see this ship - I cannot believe a ship like this could come from a Cardiff owner”.

Modern in her streamlined appearance, St Eystyn had a wealth of practical fittings. Over a hull 141m (465 ft) in overall length, carrying up to 9,000 tonnes of cargo in 632,800 ft³, she had a five-deck superstructure, five cargo hatches and a generous amount of cargo gear. The crew, with the exception of the cabin officers and single-cabin berths. The ship’s office spaces had external doors so that, notably in South American ports, visitors on business did not have to intrude into the living space. To enhance productivity, the witchmen stowrobes were located in permanent shelters. The main galley was adjacent to the dining saloon and the four mess rooms, so that food was served hot and fresh. The main engine room for the 5,300bhp Donford diesel was planned to the last detail for ease of maintenance. It contained the ship’s tanks, gas combustion making sounding into them unnecessary. A number of smokers’ rooms on the Bridge were geared for reading with the draughts fore and aft and a pioneering device with which to salute callers, and details. The compressed air system was located on the foremast to make its necessary use in fog less audible in the accommodation where watchkeepers would be asleep. Unusually for a cargo ship, St Eystyn had an own laundry. These and other features combined to produce a ship that was years ahead of her time.

Since our earliest days, the South American Saint Line ships had carried a few passengers. The layout and finish for the 12 passengers aboard St Eystyn, accommodated in two double and eight single cabins, was state-of-the-art. John Church had cleverly laid out the two cabins on the Bow Deck, each side of the machinery casing in an area that might only have been suitable for the captain’s suite. Each cabin had its own bathroom. At the after end was a veranda opening onto deck space. Connected by their own stairs, the passengers could descend to their lounge at the forward end of the Bridge Deck and then down to the foyer and the Dining Saloon that stretched across the width of the Upper Deck. This spectacular room could seat all the passengers, officers and cadets in one sitting at tables for four, six and eight. To current eyes the fake fireplaces in the public rooms and senior officers’ suites might seem odd, but they provided a focal point for Lady Howard de Walden’s sumptuously decorated. For a British so broke that even bread was rationed, St Eystyn represented hopes for a brighter future.

NO REFRIGERATED CARGO

Unusually for cargo ships involved in the South American trade, none of Dick Street’s fleet carried refrigerated cargo. The refrigerated trade was left to the smaller refrigerated tramp St Beatrice, which ran to Buenos Aires and St Thomas, which had been delivered in 1954 and three ships were now able to run on a 90-day scheduled service, for which the refrigeration was loading at London, Antwerp, Hamburg and Lisbon for Rio de Janeiro, Santos, Montevideo and Buenos Aires. The northbound cargoes were for London only. The other four vessels of the fleet acted as ‘sweeps’, gathering up cargo that the scheduled service could not carry and taking it to and from ports on the service. St John was built with a topping lift for each of the 14 dericks. This feature, not yet common on other ships, followed the tradition established by John Church of including innovative design features on his active shipping. As the controlling shareholder, Lord Howard de Walden postponed St Rannos’ delivery for one month in May 1961 whilst South American Saint Line was sold to Nordenfjelds of London who, within a year, were in financial difficulties.

END OF THE LINE

The end of the company as an own entity came with the sale of St Rannos to Newcastle tramp owners in 1963 and St John going to London-based Sartorius in 1965. The new owners have always been discerning buyers of ships for their China Navigation Company, which operates St Eystyn and St Thomas became, respectively, Tasmun and Tidane from 1965 to 1971 and then ships built to serve one container line in the Southern Hemisphere ended serving another continent – Australia. In her twilight years, St Eystyn became the tramp ship Lady Two and her Portuguese owners, unwilling to put her through a survey, sold her for scrap in 1979 and she was broken up at Keelung in Taiwan. It is interesting to speculate what would have happened to South American Saint Line if Dick Street had lived beyond 60. Already decorated with a CBE, awarded in 1959, he would certainly have been knighted, such were his contributions to public life, and would probably have become president of the Brits Chamber of Shipping. Having expanded into South Africa in 1953 with the purchase of a local shipping and travel agency, a round-the-world cargo service was established in partnership with Japan’s Kawasaki trading group. With captive cargo this subsidiary might have grown to rival Maersk today. John Church had done much work towards building four ore carriers for British Steel. There is a certain irony that, after Nordenfjeld’s collapse, the Collapse rights of South American Saint Line went to Houlder Brothers who, by coincidence, built eight ore carriers for British Steel who, today known as Corus, own the South American Saint Line title. Dick Street lived, his red and black thrashed vessels would have carried on to trade worldwide. The company, probably run by his son Lindsay, would have continued to produce a part of British shipping in that fine tradition which can still be measured today in the recollection of Dick Street’s great achievements.

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