

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.

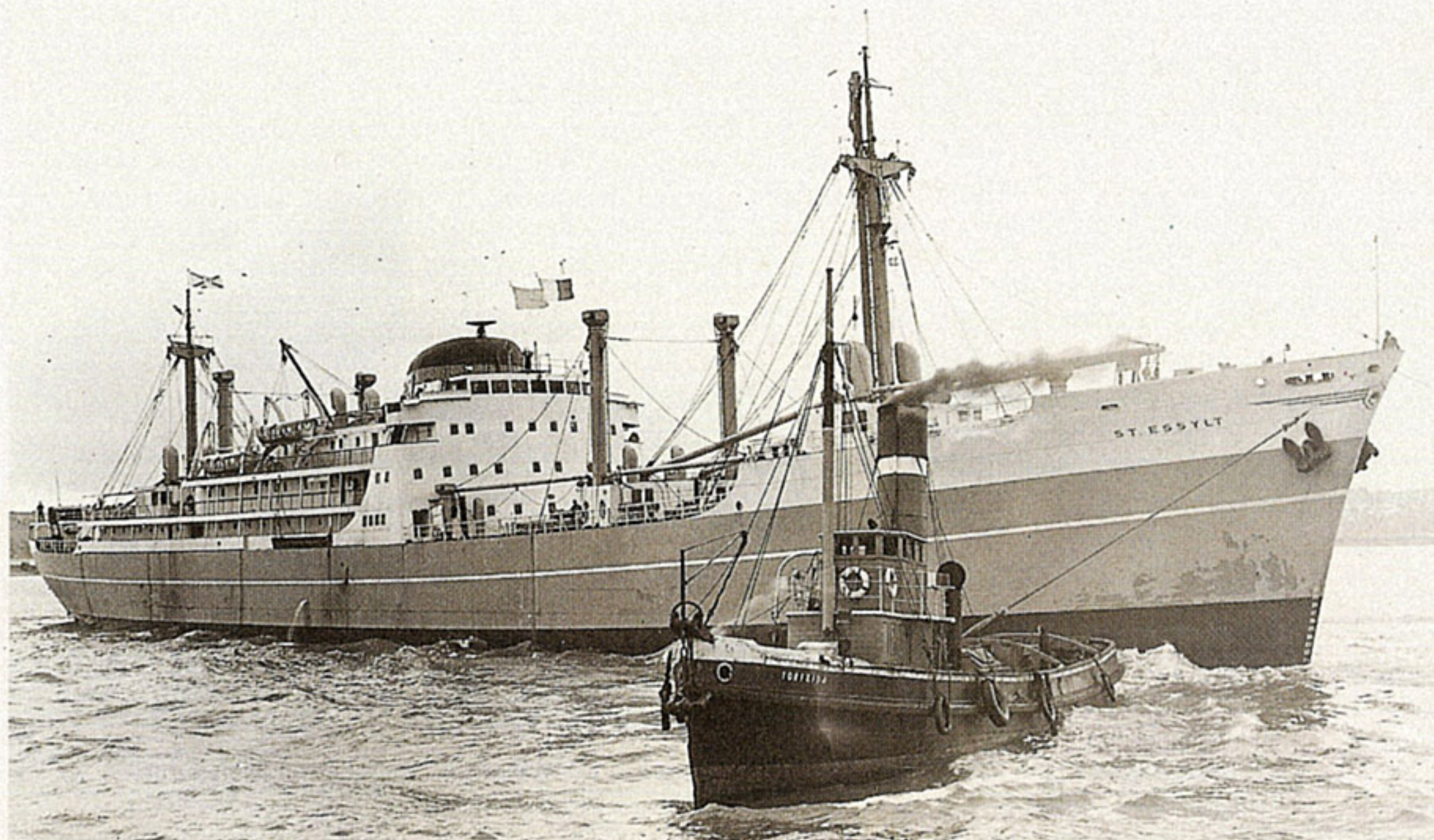
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Possibly the proudest moment of Dick Street's life was on the afternoon of Thursday 25 June 1948 when, with his wife Margaret and his daughter Marjorie, he sailed from Cardiff, Saint Line's home port, as a passenger on-board the brand new ship, *St Essylt*. This vessel had received widespread publicity as the epitome of post-War style and a sign of Britain's economic thrust into a world at peace. *St Essylt* was sailing as part of South American Saint Line's scheduled cargo service to the east coast of South America. From a Britain nearly bankrupted by six years of war, the ship carried a general cargo that was the result of the Government's export campaign.

ABOVE: The clean lines of *St Essylt* (1947/6,950gt) are clearly seen as she passes through the English Channel.

LEFT: *St Essylt* berths at Cardiff with the help of the tug *Torfrida*.



Welsh Industrial & Maritime Museum, Cardiff

South American Saint Line had, in the 1930s, grown from the combined shipping ventures of George Bailey, of the Bailey ship repairing company serving the South Wales ports, and Dick Street's trans-Atlantic trading tramp ships. St Quintin Shipping merged with Barry Shipping to form B&S and soon established a staple trade from South Wales to Rosario in Argentina carrying, southbound, coal for the then British-owned railways and returning northbound with grain in bulk. It was a short commercial step from the spot market to limited rights in the South American Freight 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 steam ships were built by J. L. Thompson of Sunderland. This was made possible after Dick Street won the financial support of the 8th Lord Howard de Walden and Seaford (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 southbound sailing every ten days. To meet this demand another quartet of ships was ordered from J. L. Thompson. With twenty years of development to rely on, George Bailey advocated that the new ships be diesel engined by Doxfords. The first *St Essylt* 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 tonnes, her delivery was extensively delayed because a replacement crankshaft, originally ordered from Czechoslovakia, became war-bound so Doxfords had to produce one locally. At a cost of £181,500, delivery was finally

RIGHT: South American Saint Line's first *St Essylt* (1941/5,634grt) was torpedoed and sunk by a U-boat on 4 July 1943 during the Sicily landings. This rare wartime photograph shows her anchored off Arzew on the North African coast in 1942.



Laurence Dunn Collection

vintage cargo liners

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

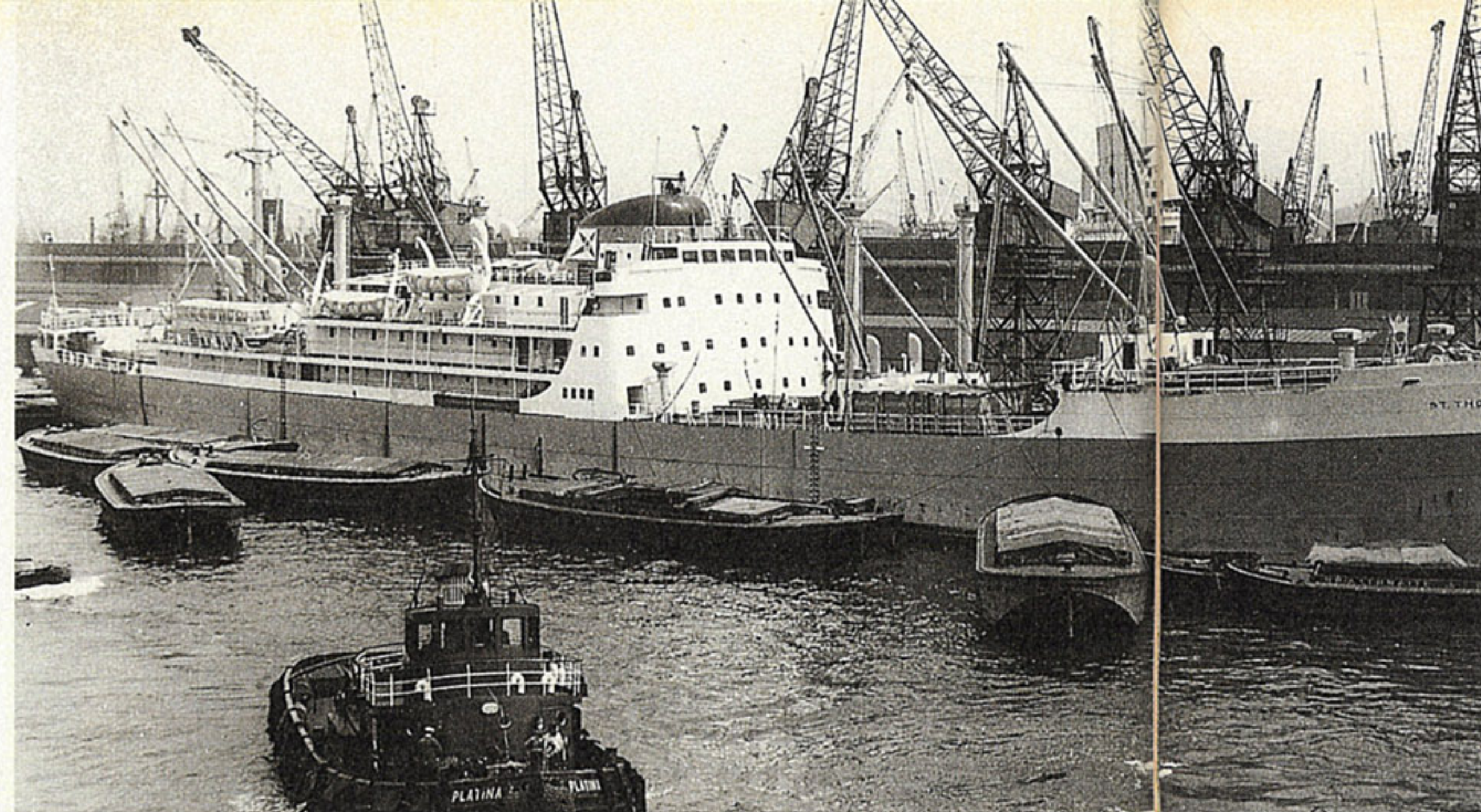
The first *St Essylt* was, in common with all war-built ships, completed with a spartan finish but she had one notable feature. Although housed down aft, some of the ratings and all of the petty officers had single-berth cabins. As early as March 1943, John E. Church presented a paper to the Institute 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 Thompson, famously remembered for having designed the *Liberty Ship*, had created the first *St Essylt*, it was John Church who drew the general arrangement plans of what was to become the second *St Essylt*. 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 co-incidence that on adjacent building berths to *St Essylt* 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*, sponsored by Mrs Street, followed down

the ways in March 1948, but it was *St Essylt* 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 Montevideo 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 Essylt* had a wealth of practical fittings. Over a hull 144m (472.5ft) in overall length, carrying up to 9,500 tonnes of cargo in 632,800ft², was a low superstructure, five cargo hatches and a generous amount of cargo gear. The crew, with the exception of four cadets, had single-berth cabins. 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 winchmen stevedores 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-cylinder, 5,300bhp Doxford diesel was planned to the last detail for clean and easy maintenance. It contained the ship's tanks' gauges making sounding into them unnecessary. In the Chart Room on the Bridge were gauges for reading the draughts fore and aft and a pioneering device with which to calculate stability details. The compressed air siren was located on the foremast thus making its statutory use in fog less audible in the accommodation where watch-keepers would be asleep. Unusually for a cargo ship, *St Essylt* had her own laundry. These and other features combined to produce a ship that was years ahead of her time.

Since its earliest days, the South American Saint Line ships had carried a few passengers. The layout and finish for the 12 passengers onboard *St Essylt*, accommodated in two double and eight single cabins, was state-of-the-art. John Church had cleverly laid out the ten cabins on the Boat Deck either side of the machinery casing in an area that might only have been suitable for the captain's suite. Each cabin had its own bath room. At the after end was a verandah opening onto



LEFT: *St Thomas (II)* in London's Royal Albert Dock discharging her cargo into lighters.

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 false 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 designed decor. For a Britain so broke that even bread was rationed, *St Essylt* 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 reefer meat trades were left to the conglomerated interests of Vestey's Blue Star line, the Royal Mail Line, Houlder Brothers and the Donaldsons' small company. But with an eye on the future, John Church had equipped *St Essylt* with the capacity to carry 1,500 tonnes of edible oils in seven tanks. Within the next 20 years this northbound trade was to be taken over by the tanker load.

The entry into service of *St Essylt* and *St Thomas* enabled South American Saint Line to open a route outside their Freight Conference membership from their home

port of Cardiff. However, such was the demand for cargo space from the established loading ports that this was soon dropped. International trade diplomacy is never missing from the strategy of a successful cargo liner company and so it was that Dick Street actively supported Hamburg-Süd American's application to rejoin the freight conferences. In another move ahead of its time, a comprehensive service was offered to shippers, known as groupage. This service was commonly available as a backup to containerisation. This subsidiary was named Sanlinea, Spanish for Saint Line.

Such was the financial success of *St Essylt* and *St Thomas*, that a third ship was ordered from J. L. Thompson's Sunderland yard. Costing £750,000, *St John* was delivered in 1954 and three ships were now able to run on a 90-day scheduled service, for which the rotation 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 ships of the fleet acted as 'sweepers', 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 derricks. This feature, not yet common on other ships, followed the tradition established by John Church of including innovative design features on his

ships. Whilst there was a perennial debate about whether it was financially viable to have installed accommodation for just twelve passengers and carry extra staff to attend them, the intangible aspect was that valued customers, who might influence cargo to be carried by the Line, could be offered complimentary passages and winter sunshine cruises. But when the fourth ship of the class, *St Rosario*, was ordered in 1959 for delivery in 1961 she was without accommodation for 12 passengers and had only an owner's suite adjacent to the captain's cabin. The superstructure was concentrated on two decks which gave a larger No.4 hatch. In the main engine room one of Doxford's new P-range engines was installed.

Cyril Thompson was proud that *St Rosario* had been assembled on the building berth in just 12 weeks but the launch, on 7 January 1961, sponsored by the 19-year-old Jessica Scott-Ellis, was overshadowed by the death of Dick Street 11 days earlier. Almost immediately her father, the 9th Lord Howard de Walden (1912-1999), decided to move his investments out of

Principal Particulars – *St Essylt (II)*

Built	J.L. Thompson & Sons Ltd, Sunderland, 1947
Gross tonnage	6,950 grt
Net tonnage	3,850 tonnes
Deadweight tonnage	9,500 tonnes
Length overall	472.5ft
Length between perpendiculars	440ft
Breadth moulded	59.3ft
Machinery	Doxford Opposed Piston 5-cyl Oil Engine (5,300bhp at 114rpm), single screw
Service speed	14-15 knots
Career	1965, sold to China Navigation Group, renamed Yunnan. 1971 sold to Greek owners, renamed Luck Two. Broken up in Taiwan 1979

active shipping. As the controlling shareholder, Lord Howard de Walden postponed *St Rosario*'s delivery for one month in May 1961 whilst South American Saint Line was sold to Nerdrum of London who, within a year, were in financial difficulties.

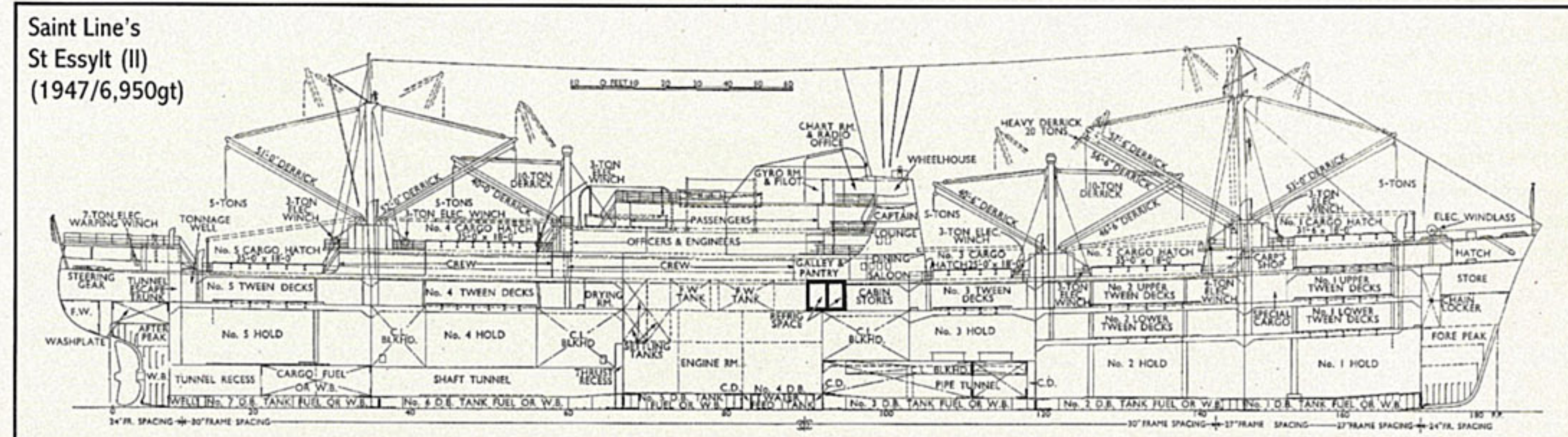
END OF THE LINE

The end of the company as its own entity came with the sale of *St Rosario* to Newcastle tramp owners in 1963 and *St John* going to London Greeks in 1965. The Swire Group have always been discerning buyers of ships for their China Navigation Company, and *St Essylt* and *St Thomas* became, respectively, *Yunnan* and *Tochow* from 1965 to 1971 and thus ships built to serve one continent in the Southern Hemisphere ended serving another continent – Australia. In her twilight years, *St Essylt* became the tramp ship *Lucky Two* and her Panamanian owners, unwilling to put her through a survey, sold her for scrap in 1979 and she was broken up at Kaohsiung 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 British 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 Nerdrum's collapse, the Conference 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. Had Dick Street lived, his red and black funnelled 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. ✦ Thanks to Dr David Jenkins, Lindsay Street, Peter Newall and Paul Heaton and his definitive book on the Line.



RIGHT: *St Essylt* loading cargo for South America at Empire Wharf in Cardiff Docks in the early 1950s.

