

Cunard Line

5th June 2014 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

Society members were joined by some employees and many ex-employees of Cunard to hear an enjoyable and interesting talk by David Pepper about the Cunard Line. He was a former Cruise Director of the QE2 and Queen Mary 2, so was an ideal person to give this illustrated presentation.

David started by talking about the formation of the company in London, by a Canadian Samuel Cunard, which won a government contract to undertake a mail service from Liverpool to America in 1840. Cunard acquired and used four ships with safety being more important than speed. By the Crimea War, it had eleven ships which transported troops and horses to and from Crimea.

Over the following years Cunard carried many emigrants from Britain. In 1881 the company built its first steel ship with electric lighting, designed just for passengers.

Throughout its passenger carrying history the company has promoted and been renowned for its Britishness and luxury. At the beginning of the 1900s Cunard had three sister ships, including the Mauretania, which were aimed to be the fastest and most luxurious transatlantic ships in service. There were four classes of accommodation for passengers on these ships.

During the First World War one million service men were transported and some of its ships were used as hospital ships. After this Southampton became its transatlantic home port instead of Liverpool and in the 1920s the shipping line undertook its first world cruise.

In the late 1930s the famous Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth were built. In 1938 the Queen Mary gained the Blue Riband, the record for the fastest crossing of the Atlantic by a passenger liner. Other Cunard ships held this record during the company's history. In the Second World War they were the fastest troopships, so for much of the time did not need escorts due to their speed.

After the war these ships were carrying over a thousand passengers on their weekly Atlantic crossings, with many famous celebrities using them. With the introduction of jet air transport, the numbers of passengers dropped, to 200 a voyage in the 1960s. By 1965 the whole fleet was running at a loss.

Cunard took a brave decision to build a new smaller and more versatile ship, the QE2, which could undertake transatlantic voyages and cruises. As previous company vessels she played an important part in the Falklands war. The introduction of the current Cunard ships, such as the Queen Mary 2, was then told.

David concluded by speaking about his time working for Cunard and what life was like on some of its luxury vessels. This included the many celebrities he met such as Shirley Bassey, Rod Stewart and John Cleese. He told a variety of

humorous stories about some of the passengers he met. This included silly questions which he was asked, such as “Has this ship ever sunk?” or “Do the crew live onboard?”

An excellent and entertaining talk! As next year is the Cunard Line’s 175th anniversary, David will certainly be asked to give this talk again by other groups.