



The Story
of
Lyle Shipping Company Limited

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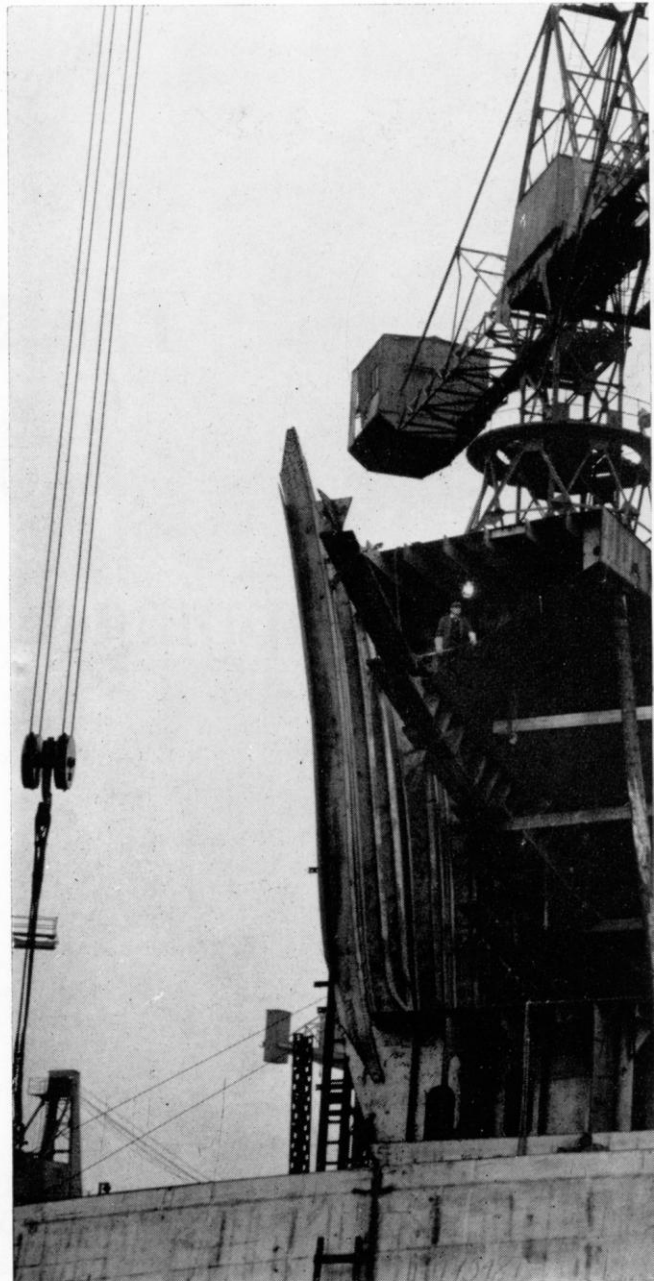
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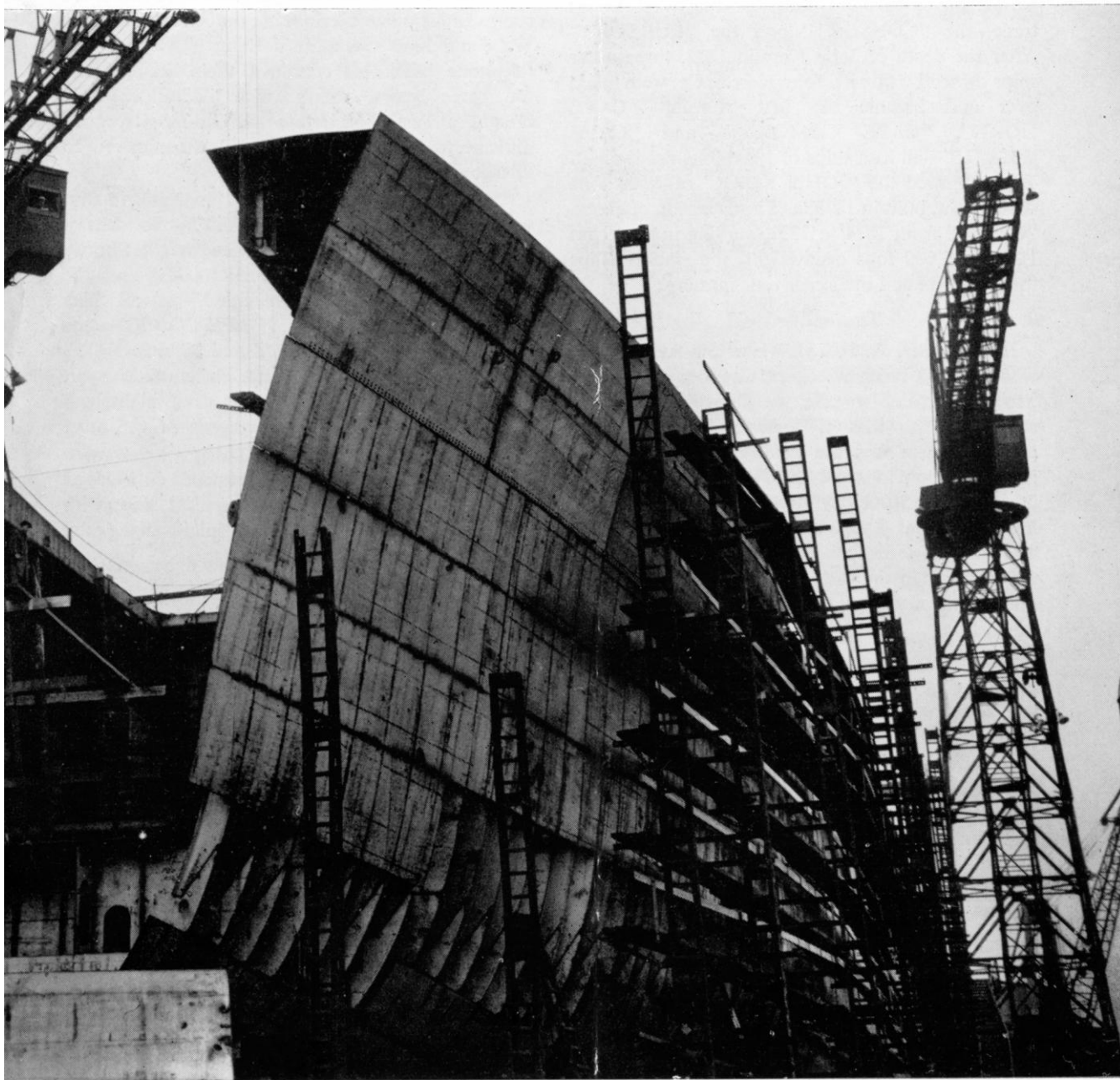
In 1904 when Lyles wanted their second steamship, W. T. Lithgow came to see them, produced plans from his pocket, and fixed the details there and then. When it was arranged he bundled up his papers; and as he was being shown out he turned and said: "You've built one ship outwith Russell's Yard. You'll never build another." And for all practical purposes he was right. Lithgows (they were called Russell & Co. in those days) have built every Lyle ship since then with the exception only of two, and these went elsewhere because the Lithgow berths were full at the time they were needed. Lyles are among our oldest and most friendly customers.

The Lyle connection with Greenock can be traced right back to one John Lyle who was born there in 1669. He was the grandfather of the first Abram Lyle, borne in 1741, who plied the trade of weaver. The latter's grandson, also Abram, (born 1783), was the first of the family to become interested in the sea, beginning as a fishing smack owner in early life and becoming a shipowner, in the larger meaning of the term, as things prospered with him. His firm became Abram Lyle & Co., and the earliest shipping transactions can be traced to the year 1827. He also ran a cooperage for use in the sugar and molasses

The latest Lyle ship, 'Cape Rodney', under construction at Lithgows' East Yard. She is 16,750 tons deadweight. Above: one of the earliest—'Cape Sable', lost with all hands in 1880.



LYLE SHIPPING COMPANY



LYLE SHIPPING continued

trade, making the casks in which the sugar was brought in small sailing vessels from the West Indies; and of course it is in connection with sugar that the name Lyle is still most widely known. However, the family has also been in shipping for five generations, and at first this was directly connected with the sugar side of the business.

In the 1850s, two sailing ships were bought in partnership with John Kerr for the West Indies trade—the “CONSORT” and the “PURSUIT.” After the death of John Kerr in 1872, three other ships owned by Messrs. John Kerr & Co. were taken over and became the first “Capes”—“CAPE HORN”, “CAPE COMORIN” and “CAPE WRATH”—all iron ships of 1,800 tons deadweight. Then followed the “JOHN KERR” of 2,500 tons deadweight, built in 1873, and a succession of eleven “CAPES” from 1874 to 1892, varying in size from 1,200 to 3,000 tons deadweight, the smaller ships three-masters and the larger four-masters.

The end of sail

In 1881, Mr. A. P. Lyle—later Sir Alexander—who, with his brother Robert, was in charge of the business, decided to take the plunge and go into steam. The ship that R. Steele & Co. of Greenock built for them was the “CAPE CLEAR”, 1,800 registered gross tons and 3,000 tons deadweight, and born under an unlucky star. She caused so many headaches that Lyles built no more steamships. They did, however, build three more sailing ships in 1890/92, but in the early Nineties the decision was taken to dispose of all the remaining sailing ships.

There the matter rested for a few years, until 1902. By this time sugar had gone south and the only members of the family left in Greenock were Alexander and Robert Lyle, who had stayed behind after the sale of their ships to help their workmen find employment by turning the old cooperage into a furniture factory. Also in Greenock at this time were two ambitious young men, Peter C. Macfarlane and James Shearer, employed by the Greenock Steamship Co., but eager to start up on their own. They knew that Mr. Alexander Lyle was eager to see the Lyle house flag again flying on the high seas.

Colonel P. C. Macfarlane, still with us today and now Honorary President of Lyles, remembers well the early days of the present company.

“We had little to start with” he says, “but as it happened I had a wealthy uncle, John Birkmyre, and Alexander Lyle had one son, Archie. My uncle

backed me and took a share in the venture himself; and Alexander Lyle, knowing that his son was due down from Oxford in a year or two, wanted to create a job for him. So Archie came in too. His father gave us his blessing, and of course money; but most important of all he gave us the family name and the flag. We were able to register as The Lyle Shipping Company, with all the goodwill that that implied. That was how we got our fresh start.

“Alexander Lyle was generous in other ways too, for, when he sent for Mr. Shearer and myself to tell us his decision, he also told us there were two spare rooms in his office overlooking the Albert Harbour. We could have them for nothing if we paid our telephone bill! This remained their headquarters for three years, after which Alexander Lyle bought a Perthshire estate and found Greenock difficult to reach. The office was then moved to Glasgow.

“The company was formed in 1903, and in that year its ‘CAPE ANTIBES’ was built by Dobsons of Newcastle-on-Tyne—5,000 tons deadweight. Shortly afterwards came the ‘CAPE BRETON’ and the beginning of the association with Lithgows which extends to the present day. ‘CAPE CORSO’ came next, ‘CAPE FINNISTERRE’ and ‘CAPE ORTEGAL’, each of them an advance on its predecessor. The ‘ORTEGAL’ was 8,200 tons deadweight, and with a speed of 10½ knots was one of the most advanced tramp ships of her day.

“I remember the ‘CORSO’, launched in 1905, as an exceptionally good and economical ship, with luxuries like electric light and inlaid mahogany panelling in the saloon!

Gross extravagance

“The ‘FINISTERRE’ cost £3,000 more, and I remember we thought that was grossly extravagant. The whole ship, 7,400 tons of her, cost £49,000. That’s something to think of today. There was never any formal contract for these ships. W. T. Lithgow just went off and did an economical job, and the bill came in after it was finished—like buying something in a shop.”

Times were bad in the early days of the firm, but good management had its effect and the position steadily improved, especially after James Shearer, Junior, joined it immediately before the First World War. Shearer, son-in-law of the senior James Shearer, was a forthright, hard-bargaining man, who could not stand deception of any kind, and was a great stickler for detail. He took all his telephone conversations down in shorthand and held them in evidence, often for years. He had a finger in every pie and was a bad delegator, but his was the drive which put the

firm on the way to success. He retired from active participation in the business some years ago and it was with feelings of genuine sadness that we learned of his passing away on 29th December last.

The Lyle Shipping Company went into the First World War with five ships, four of which, as stated above, had been built by Lithgows. Only two survived, "CAPE BRETON" and "CAPE ORTEGAL". Trade was depressed after the war, but it was picking up again by the mid-Twenties and in 1925 Lyles decided to order their first motor ship, the "CAPE OF GOOD HOPE", Lithgow-built as usual. She ran her trials in 1926, the first Clyde-built diesel ship ordered by Scottish owners, and proved herself to be sound and economical. In 1927 the firm bought another motor ship, the 9,100 ton "CAPE YORK". She, too, was a Lithgow ship, twin-screw, with a Werkspoor engine and a most economical unit of the fleet. Both these early motor-ships gave a very good account of themselves until they were sunk in the Second World War.

Shrewd contracts

James Shearer believed in bulk contracts, which largely accounts for the company's record during the slump. These contracts, shrewdly made at the right times, were for large quantities of some commodity to be moved over a period of months or years at a fixed price. These were of great help when the slump of the Thirties came and cargoes were hard to find. The company paid no dividend for several years, but it was able to boast then, as it is still able to boast today, that it very rarely had to lay up a ship.

Though times were bad, the company bought bargains when it saw them, and it entered the second war with nine ships of its own. It lost them all but one; but since replacements were built as the war went on and several ships were bought from the Ministry as it ended, the Lyle fleet in 1945 consisted of 11 ships.

The steady growth of Lyles in size and influence has been mainly due to straightforward good management rather than to the occasional major decision; but the purchase of the Ministry ships does fall into the latter class. The decision was made on the initiative of James Shearer. The Government was offering (usually first of all to the firms which had managed them throughout the war) numbers of Liberties, Forts, Empires, Oceans and other standard types at reasonable prices in much the same way as they had done at the end of the first war. Some fingers had been burned then, for the slump of the early Twenties wrote off values heavily; and this, said the pessimists, would happen again. James Shearer disagreed. He bought while others waited

for prices to fall and so equipped the company for the rising market, and rising prices, which lay ahead. New tonnage was difficult to build at that time, but as opportunity offered it too was added to the Lyle fleet. This bold expansion at a time when others waited to see which way the cat would jump has stood the firm in good stead ever since.

For a few years after the war all voyages were directed by the Ministry of Transport at regulated rates. No one enjoyed being dictated to, but the rates were adequate, covered depreciation, and allowed the new fleet to be built up. The link with Lithgows continued and in 1946 "CAPE ORTEGAL" was launched, followed three months later by "CAPE RODNEY", both of them diesels.

During the peak of the shipbuilding boom, shortly after the Korean war began, two Lyle ships were built elsewhere, Lithgows being too busy building three ore carriers for them to make room for the other cargo ships—the only ones apart from their very first to be so built in time of peace. In war, of course, ships had to be built where they could be got. Lyles say they have had such close ties with Lithgows for so long that they feel they get as good a bargain from us as they would if they went out to tender all over the world. We on our side feel we know what they want. It has been a very happy association. In fact, the ties are so close that when they were considering who should launch the last of the three ore carriers—"CAPE HOWE"—their choice fell on Gwendolyn, Lady Lithgow, a gesture which was greatly appreciated by us as well as by her ladyship.

The modern trend

Lyles are a tramp company and have therefore seen their share of change during the sixty years of their existence. When they first began to trade, the factor which more than anything else fixed the pattern of tramping was the export of coal from U.K. to countries and coaling stations all over the world. This, of course, has almost entirely disappeared and the advent of the large bulk carrier has begun to impose a new pattern in tramp shipping. The modern trend is the one favoured for so many years by James Shearer, a programme of bulk contracts to form the mainstay of a firms' trading, with the lesser cargoes fitted into it. Lyles have pursued this course so successfully that at present, despite the world shipping recession, they quite often charter other people's ships to fulfil their contracts.

Most of the cargoes for tramps are fixed through the Baltic Exchange in London, but with bulk contracts growing steadily in importance the prudent shipowner spends more of his time on

travel than he ever did in the old days. William Nicholson, who took over as managing director from James Shearer seven years ago, believes that personal contact is vitally important today, and he has been as far afield as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan in pursuit of it and the contracts it brings. Times may be difficult, he says, but even under today's conditions an active shipowner with modern ideas and good ships can keep his head above water.

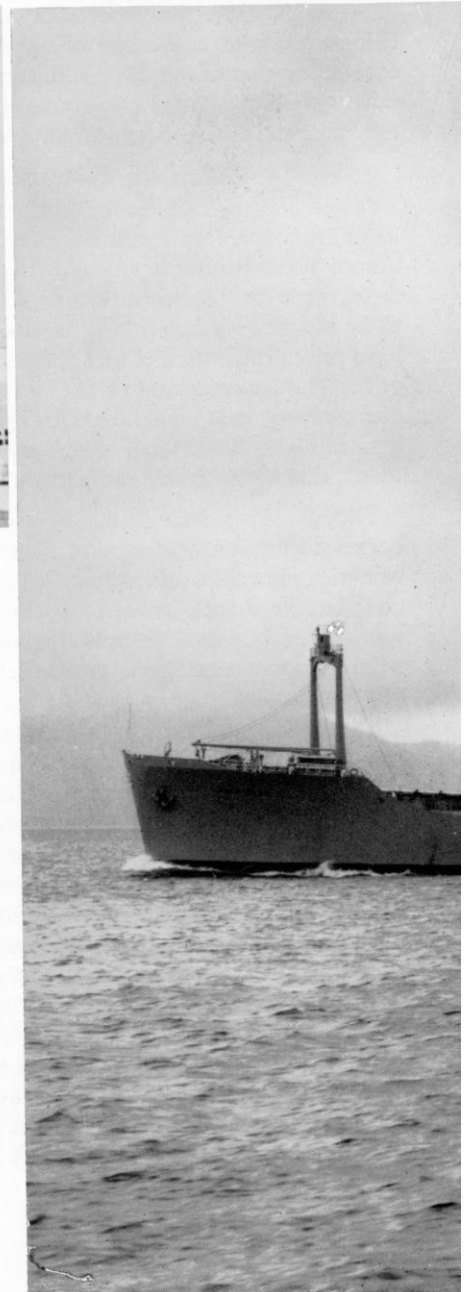
The ships themselves have changed even more than the trade, and in no respect more strikingly than in the crews' quarters. Says Colonel Macfarlane: "When the old "CAPE BRETON" was built there was a bill for upholstery—a cushion on the captain's settee and a chair or two, total £30. In our latest

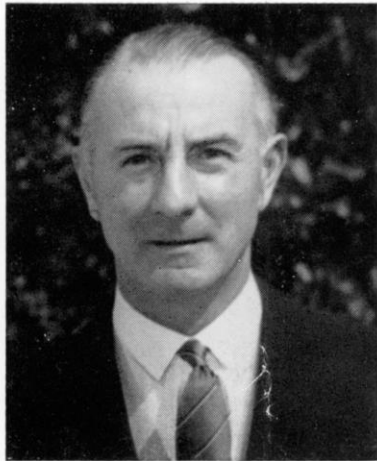
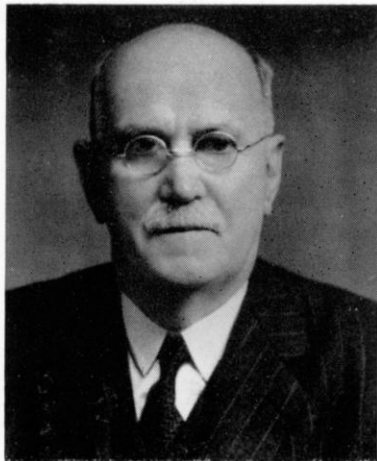


ship, upholstery cost £18,000."

Nor does the change stop there. The common fo'csle divided between sailors and firemen has gone: there are individual rooms now with linen and towels and interior-spring mattresses. Half a century ago even the officers had to find their own linen, and the men slept on the "donkey's breakfast", the old straw mattresses which were thrown overboard at the end of a voyage and used to come in on the tide at Innellan. The bosun and carpenter usually shared a room in the old days, and the apprentices had one room for three or four, where they slept, ate, washed and studied. Now everyone has his own room, there are recreation rooms instead of the old meeting place—No. 1 hatch—films are provided when the ships are at sea and television sets in port. Changed days indeed.

The Lyle fleet is up-to-date and more than holding its own even in the thin times of tramp shipping today. We wish it continuing success in the future—with, naturally, Lithgow ships to help it.





Far left: At the 'Cape Howe' launch A. H. White, William Nicholson, A. Ross Belch, Col. P. C. Macfarlane and Gwendolyn, Lady Lithgow. Left: 'Cape Finisterre', Lithgow-built in 1874 and still going strong as an Egyptian training ship when we last heard of her in 1948. The two portraits are, left, James Shearer and, right, William Nicholson. Below: 'Cape Howe', one of the most notable post-war additions to the Lyle fleet.

