QE2, 1968, 65,683 tons, 963 x 105 feet, Cunard
Fitting out at John Brown, Clydebank

The launch and the sea trials

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The Launch

There was tradition behind it - Queen Elizabeth and Queen Mary. And now Cunard talked of a new Queen. First it was called the Q3. And the Cunard Naval Architect, Woods, did not see why they should turn to Carrier after years of good service by Thermostank. The idea of valve-less controls of heating and cooling in the cabins (no leaking valves above false ceiling) that was part of the Carrier Marinair system made him hesitate. But there was the problem of local service. So Carrier and Winsor joined as partners to quote for the Air Conditioning, Ventilation of the proposed Q3.

The economic position and costs sank the Q3. At this stage, Carrier's chances of winning the contract for the modified design were poor, especially when Vickers lost out on the original. However, Carrier had friends in Liverpool who kept our alternative proposals for the modified ship Q4 very much to themselves. Even with the competitor's designer being at their offices on alternate weeks to our visits, he never got as much as a hint of our plans for a concentration of plant rooms on one deck. This was the Carrier Winsor trump card, centralising all our essential services, with the consequent casing of maintenance for the engineers and leaving valuable space on the upper decks to the interior designers and reducing weight at the high level and a great deal of money. When these proposals were released by Cunard at a later date in the negotiations the competition had no answer.

The consortium had its problems during the contract, Carrier did not think Winsor were giving high enough priority and there were stresses
between middle-rank managers but these were invariably cleared by discussion though often with loss of time.

The system itself was sound and the adoption of the continuous slot outlet throughout the ship was most successful, contributing greatly to the decorative architect's task by giving them ceilings free of any obstructions or outlets which could mar their designs. So we come to the Launch of the Q4. Lord Aberconway announced that excellent progress was being made on the construction and that it should be on programme at the launching on September 20th, 1957.

What does one remember from a day of such excitement. The cloud of red dust that swirled up on either side of the ship as she entered the water and the chains began their holding. The sheer blotting out of all other view was that bulbous bow but as it immersed into the water in a tipping motion, the sleekness of the bow came into view and merged into a great picture of classic colour with the water, the people and the fields. There had been minutes of waiting and wondering whether this or that position would give the best view of the arrival of the Queen.

The questioning on what might be the name. The small silver object in a box on the stand as the possible memento.

The movement on the left, the hurrying of photographers and soon the light blue coated and hatted figure of the Queen and party, Princess Margaret in white coat with brown marking and hat to match, shepherded around the bulbous bow with an Admiral in attendance and Prince Phillip sauntering behind, waggling a brown felt hat and loosely clad in blue serge - the balding patch in his hair not so noticeable with the tanned skin and browning hair.
The party walk right round the ship, stop at the launching gear amidships and then return so that we get front views to great content - but no camera.

Then the pause as they climb the steps before they come again into view. Lord Aberconway escorted the Queen to the stage, a flash of a hand and the band plays God Save the Queen. Someone behind us says "how tired she must be of that tune".

Rannie slaps the loud speaker. A John Brown man behind me says "if that doesn't work --- " but there is a shout of noise and the resultant laugh of relief and the request to the Queen to name and launch Ship 736 - a slight pause everyone seemingly draws in their breath - the girlish voice says "I name this ship Queen Elizabeth the Second" - there's a shout of hurrahs - A. specially as this had been his thought - the lever pulls the string and the frill covered bottle swings against the bulbous bow - breaks with a small flood of foam and liquid - again a shout of hurrahs then the signal all clear (the crowd of men from under midships clear right and left to the safety of the enclosures) - a pause - a bowler hatted figure mounts the wooden set of steps at the bow - waves his bowler a few times - joggles a lever - another pause and slowly, evenly, the great ship moves down the slides and enters the water. The high towers, the cranes, the masses of TV cameras here and there - in batches, cameramen in special stands - film men up on a special stage way over on the opposite hillock. And everywhere crowds multi coloured and cheerful because the weather is clear and even the sun shines as the ship is hustled by the tugs around and into the new basin where she will be outfitted.
When the ceremony of breaking the bottle and starting the ship on its way down the ramps had been completed, we all filed down the stops and formed as a queue in the passage through the carpenters' shop onto the red carpet into the Staff Dining Room, bearded Capt. Warwick joined the queue just beside us.

Tea was an excitement and not a bore. Gardener - the design chappie - with his long grey flowing hair, worn suede shoes - stirred me into one-upmanship. Peg dealt cheerfully with the pair from National Ports, who had spent time in Kenya - and found the Honourable Lady Wheeler eccentric but responsive to a bat and ball episode on coffee and tea.

Later we watch the Prince being presented with a special dinghy in remembrance of the occasion, we can see how nervous the Queen is, how apprehensive and the reason - she has to make a speech. The relief that seems to flow all over her, as she sits down after those few gracious words in her high pitched girlish voice, shows how burdensome speech-making still remains - obviously inherited from her stammering father, who too had to conquer this 'fearfulness' of public speaking. Now we can see the charming woman as she chats to someone near or as she turns to ask a question. Maybe others could act the part with more theatrical effectiveness, but her performance is 'throat-catching', which is just as it should be.

Aberconway and Rannie were sad at John Brown's disappearance into the Clyde merger. Lord Mancroft very much the extrovert. Lord Geddes big, slow and dominant. The only spot of rain was as the Queen stepped into her car.
THE AIR CONDITIONING OF A "Queen"

The year, 1968, following the launch of the Queen Elizabeth the Second, the Q.E.2, was a year that will stick in the memory of all intimately concerned with the construction and trials, as disastrous. The problems of keeping up to progress were increasing every day. At the launch Lord Aberconway had said "Delivery on time - November 1968 - is at present quite feasible and attainment of that will be a major factor in the financial outcome of the contract.

Our disappointments on the air conditioning side were representative of all involved. We were plagued by workmen using our ducts as refuse shutes, in fact when the final fitting out was in progress at Southampton we could have filled a lorry with Clydebank Co-operative milk bottles taken from our ducts. We removed planks of wood and joiner's stools jammed in the air risers and one particularly difficult item was a large coil of one inch rope which had to be cut out of our chilled water main. The lack of care was matched by the inaccuracy of part completion forecasts so that the dates for handing over of any part of the accommodation for any specific purpose became more and more meaningless. It soon became clear that the trials would have to take place without total completion of all the accommodation and finally a section of some eighty six cabins was isolated for later completion. If the ship had been allowed to stay in Clydebank for another three months, most of the teething troubles could have been ironed out in private instead of in full view of the so called experts of the press industrial reporters. When the ship left Clydebank after launching for the fitting out berth at Greenock, some finishing stage workers were paid off but a few days later there was a desperate search for labour. The ship was originally due to be ready by March. This was recognised as an unrealistic target so a new date, December, 19th
1968 was fixed. Engine troubles off the Isle of Arran put paid to that and January 1st, 1969, was chosen.

On these first trials Cunard were delighted with the ship even though there were still plenty of teething troubles. One problem that foxed us for some time was a constant draining of our chilled water circuit. Constantly the cooler was full of air but no leak could be traced until finally a two inch pipe was found connecting our system to the sprinkler system! Our greatest difficulties arose from the method of construction used in the ship. The deck beams were arranged fore and aft and the thwartship deep beams and fore and aft girders had openings pre-arranged and cut in the manufacture. These openings were so placed that any piping or ducts running fore and aft would foul these running thwartship. We had to take avoiding action where we could and become involved in many arguments when we couldn't. More forethought could have made the task easier but it is only symbolic of the immense difficulty of coordinating so many different trades within such a limited space. Some responsibility for the delays and the unfinished state of the ship must be borne by the management, but the workmen also played their part in the hold up. Our consortium alone was subjected to a great deal of harassment and used as a lever by the shop stewards in their continual demands for improved pay, without any increased efforts on their part. A great deal of middle management time was spent in negotiations with them while John Rannie hovered in the background insisting that we did not hold up progress. He always underwrote any increases negotiated and the shop stewards got their way in most of the arguments. But there was no one to underwrite the loss of time by these continual arguments.
On December 23rd, 1968, the ship left for her shake-down cruise with 500 Clyde workers to finish the thousands of incomplete details, mostly minor. On Christmas Eve the port turbine started to run rough, shortly afterwards joined by the other one. A design failure that was just bad luck.

On Saturday, December 28th, there were frantic radio calls between Cunard's Chairman, Sir Basil Smallpiece, and the Cunard public relations people on the ship. Fifty two journalists were due to join her in Las Palmas that night. The Cunard boss decided not to accept the ship and to tell the press everything. He flew out to direct the operation in person.

The arrival of the journalists was a catalogue of disasters. One of the launches sent from the QE2 broke down in the harbour of Las Palmas and had to be towed. They boarded the ship to find none of the lifts was working and they had to climb five decks of stairs. It was almost midnight but men were still labouring with hammers and drills.

Smallpiece decided to hammer the Shipbuilders and John Rannie became the scape-goat. Rannie was overjoyed when he got the contract "for the people of Clydebank". In the end he was crucified. He threw his bowler hat into the wake of the QE 2 on the night he retired (forced out by the new men of U.C.S.). He smiled as he did so, but his heart must have been heavy. This was 31st December, 1968, on the way home from the shake down cruise to the Canary Islands.

The turbine problems and associated boiler troubles became of national importance as the press had a field-day on the QE2 problems but at least one newspaper stated "Queen Elizabeth II is not a "ship of shame"; on the
The success in achieving a draughtless system throughout the ship reacted unfavourably in some ways. Although fully air conditioned and performing to design conditions, the inconspicuous outlets and lack of draught or noise meant that the occupants were not aware of the system. This was the cause of some adverse comments from Cunard officials on the trials, who were expecting a blow of air and some air noise but once in full operation, passenger satisfaction was the reward for all the cooperation necessary with the design and decorative team. The main central fans were found to be hard pushed to get adequate supply in all areas but we did obtain design conditions which meant that the refrigeration and cooling system was up to and above requirements. Several years later when asked by Cunard for more cooling it was found that the cooling coil makers had mistakenly given us five row coils instead of four rows. Even in the main kitchens and bakery the overall result was much better than the kitchen staff had ever expected. The turmoil of troubles and the delays caused Cunard to change their schedule and the Maiden Voyage - a PREVIEW CRUISE took place between Tuesday 22nd and 30th April, 1969, starting from Southampton with the usual Royal Marines in their brilliant colours playing on the quay. At dinner that first night there was an awful jerk by the ship causing much consternation including the ice bucket emptying itself into my wife's lap. Next day it seems the stop was caused by the necessity to remove stow-aways. At night we are made fully aware that the stabilizer noises have not yet been cured. Teams from the main sub-contractors are on board to carry out final check tests under passenger load conditions. The cruise proceeds to Las Palmas, to Santa Cruz, Teneriffe- to Lisbon and back to Southampton. On the last night, a man dining at the next table had a heart attack, collapsed on the floor.
and we had to try to cope with him until the doctors and medical help arrived. The cruise had convinced everyone that given luck the Q.E.2 would prove a valuable Queen. By May 9th, 1969, Cunard were reporting that the travel agents' reaction had been "so enthusiastic" that even they were surprised.

During these last ten years, much has happened to the Q.E.2. Cunard have been taken over by Trafalgar House. Sir Basil Smallpiece has gone and Victor Matthews rules the Cunard waves. In May, 1972, there was an Atlantic bomb threat with national paper headlines as bomb disposal experts were flown in and dropped by parachute. A ransom demand of £135,000 was not paid. In November, 1972, the delay in a £1,750,000 face-lift with more expensive suites on the upper deck caused 1300 passengers to be stranded and the Q.E.2 to sail 60 hours late. The refit was termed "vulgar" because it was to appeal to the very wealthy gambling loving clientele.

In April 1973, the liner taking 580 Jews on a charter cruise to Israel to take part in the 25th Anniversary celebrations of the Jewish state became the centre of massive security publicity. Frogmen hunted for mines. Lightning jets from British bases in Cyprus tracked the liner. Frigates based in Gibraltar helped in the watch.

Again in April, this time 1974, and Q.E.2 headlines, Boiler fault halts Q.E.2; rescue ship takes 1600 off Q.E.2; 250 miles South West of Bermuda the passengers were transferred to the Sea Venture.

1975, November, and the headlines are IRA bomb dump is found, Q.E.2 raided after 42 are held - police raid in Southampton. But in 1976, CUNARD expects £1m profit from Q.E.2's world cruise overshadowed the
Q.E.2 holed in Atlantic storm or Fire Causes Q.E.2 return or Q.E. 2 aids sick Soviet sailor or 3 jailed for Q.E. 2 bombs plot. Some of the headlines in 1977 seem to be repeats as Hurricane Hammers the Q.E.2; Q.E. 2 blacking is lifted after job loss warning- in 1978 Q.E.2 gets away two weeks late after boiler problem; Q.E. 2 refit delay by workers; in 1979 FUEL costs cloud Q.E.2's future; 3,000 tons of FUEL for Q.E. 2 but as she visited Cape Town the headline of "THE LOOKS COUNT" seemed to match this graceful handsome prima donna that cannot help being in the news.