

AROUND THE WORLD IN 80-ISH COVERS

By Mike Dovey

In 1966 and 1967, the British Ocean Fleets company introduced what was a revolutionary new design in cargo ship, the P-class. However, just a few years later these new ships were made virtually obsolete thanks to the introduction of the formidable container ship. To survive, the P-class fleet was drafted into a round-the world service, calling at an ever-changing list of ports. Seapost expert Mike Dovey examines some of the thousands of covers that were posted on the voyages.

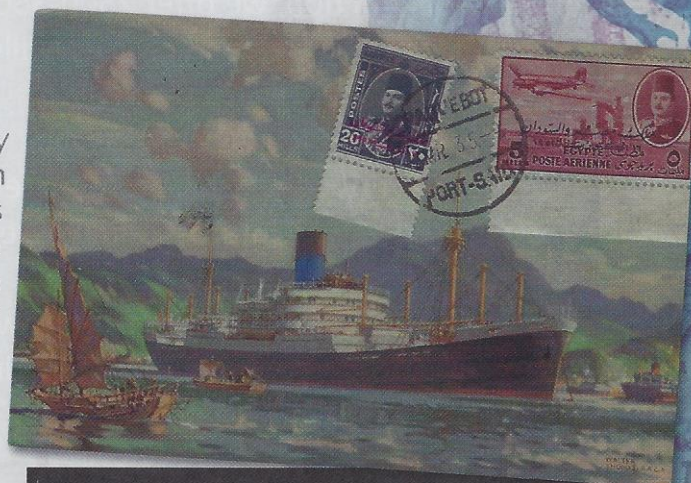


Fig 1 A picture postcard of Blue Funnel's MV *Hector* – one of the old designs of ships first introduced in the 1930s

By the mid-1960s, Ocean Transport & Trading (Ocean Fleets) consisted of three shipping companies, Glen Line, Elder Dempster and the main Blue Funnel Line, in all totalling well over 100 plus ships, of which the Blue Funnel fleet was just under 60 vessels. While Elder Dempster traded to West Africa from the UK and the USA, the other two traded all the way to the Far East and back via Indonesia with ships that had been designed since before the 1930s – a design that had been gradually upgraded but was still being built well into the 1950s. In fact, Blue Funnel ships were always instantly recognisable by their stack funnels and ship design, rather than their distinctive funnel colours (Fig 1). If that wasn't enough, then all of the names of the ships did tend to be a giveaway as they were all named after famous Greek classics. Until the mid 1960s most shipping companies saw no reason to alter either the ship design or the port handling facilities. Life was settled; life was grand.

P-class vessels

This was all to change for the company, and all companies, in the early 1960s when Ocean Fleets designed and built their P-class vessels. These were a revolution in design for the company and were of a class never seen before in Ocean Fleets colours. Designed for fast break cargos, they came into service in 1966–67, four in Glen Line colours and four in Blue Funnel colours (Fig 2), all for service basically from the home port of Liverpool to the Far East. However, with the advent of containerisation no one could foresee that within eight years these ships would be clawing for cargos



Fig 2 A picture postcard of the MV *Prometheus* in the new P-class design that came into service in 1966–67

whenever they could, as the onslaught of container vessels took over all the main routes.

For 50 years, the average gross tonnage of a ship was around 8000 tons, with a few exceptions up to 10,000 tons, depending on the route and the usual cargo. At 8000 tons, a ship could load and unload around the UK. In the case of Blue Funnel, this could mean calls at maybe Glasgow, Belfast and Liverpool. This would take usually around three weeks before the ships were ready to sail for the Far East via Suez. Any visitor to Liverpool docks in, say, 1965 would see at least six to eight Blue Funnel ships on either side of the Mersey. The ships would unload on the Liverpool side and then cross over to Birkenhead to take on cargos, which were ready prepared to load. This meant that it could take many days for a ship to enter and leave the port. The voyage would take maybe up to 150 days with stops at various ports. Delays in handling would extend that number of days even further.

These eight, newly designed vessels, which were 25 per cent bigger in size and capacity, were easier to unload and load, and had a faster speed in knots. They were clearly a big step in making the whole process a bit faster, thus saving money. Alas, with these ships still being built, a new class of ship was actively being designed so that even as the ships were making their maiden voyages, their fate was sealed and their longevity in the fleet doomed, all because of a revolutionary new design – the container ship!

By 1969, Blue Funnel Line, along with other shipping companies in a new amalgam company called Overseas Containers, had designed and built Bay-class vessels, each one of upwards to around 50,000 gross tons and dwarfing any of the previous ships in the fleet. Instead of needing more than 200 dockers at each port for loading and unloading, these new container ships needed only a handful of men, a crane, and a couple of trucks, and they could be off again in one day. Maybe the biggest asset to the shipping companies was that pilferage was reduced to nil at a stroke, which meant cheaper insurance policies.

Each of these new ships could carry cargo that maybe 15–20 conventional ships could carry. This was the death knell for virtually every fleet in the world who did not

change and change fast. Suddenly, in the space of a couple of years, a fleet of well over 60 vessels was replaced by a few new container ships, resulting in a faster, more efficient service with cheaper costs. This meant carriage rates plummeted, eventually allowing the movement of goods to be carried at around a 20th of the old rates, which opening the European markets to Far East producers.

The round-the-world Barber Blue Sea Service

To combat the dwindling routes for conventional cargo, all of the eight P-class ships were assigned to Blue Funnel and new routes were found where ports did not yet have the cranes, etc, needed to accept the new vessels. All of the ships were found work until a deal was struck so that all eight were put on the round-the-world voyage under the banner of the Barber Blue Sea Service. This was a service set up by three shipping companies, namely W Wilhelmsen of Norway, Salenrederi of Sweden and Ocean Transport & Trading (Ocean Fleets) of the United Kingdom. The eight vessels concerned from Ocean Fleets were the MV *Patroclus* (formerly MV *Glenalmond*), MV *Peisander*, MV *Perseus* (formerly MV *Radnorshire*), MV *Phemius* (formerly MV *Glenfinlas*), MV *Phrontis* (formerly MV *Pembrokeshire*), MV *Priam*, MV *Prometheus* and MV *Protesilaus*.

The reason for this round-the-world feature was a simple one, in that it moved imported goods from the Far East into the west coast ports of the USA, while exporting goods from the east coast ports to the Far East. A ship could call at any port in the USA and the Far East where there was a need. This meant that each time a ship circumnavigated the globe it could call at a different list of ports. While the bigger ports were used continuously, the smaller ports were used as and when there was a need. This meant that no two voyages were ever the same.

The actual route was very easy. It started at Vancouver in Canada and worked down the west coast of the USA, with calls at the main ports of Seattle, Tacoma, Longview, Oakland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Long Beach, San Pedro and San Diego (Fig 3). The vessels would bypass Mexico, etc, and go through the Panama Canal. Once past the ports of Balboa and Cristobal, the ship would travel round the Gulf ports of maybe Houston, Galveston, Beaumont, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Gulfport, Mobile and Pensacola, before rounding Key West and heading for Miami (Fig 4). From there, a ship would travel

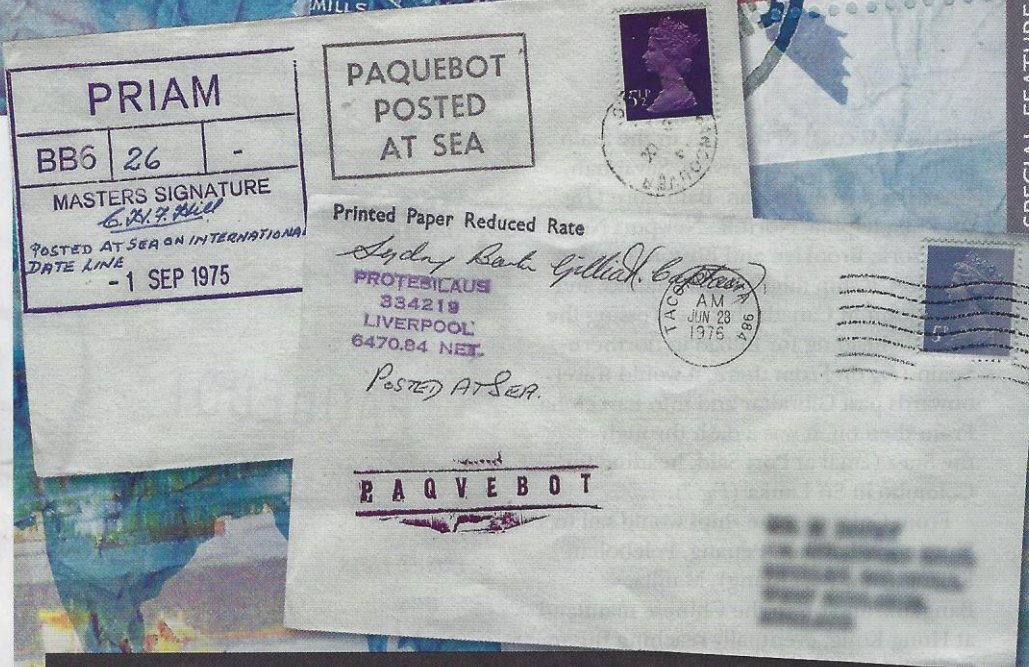


Fig 3 Covers carried from west coast ports of North America in the mid-1970s: Crofton, Vancouver (carried on the P-class MV *Priam*) and Tacoma, Washington (MV *Protesilaus*)



All covers shown reduced

Fig 4 Covers carried from the west coast of USA, through the Panama Canal into the Gulf of Mexico. The Paquebot marks shown are for the Texan ports of Houston (MV *Patroclus*), Seabrook (MV *Perseus*) and Port Arthur (MV *Peisander*), and New Orleans, Louisiana (MV *Priam*)

up the east coast of the USA in the main calling at maybe Jacksonville, Savannah, Charleston, Wilmington, Baltimore (Fig 5), Philadelphia, Norfolk, Newport News, New York, Brooklyn and Boston. Leaving the USA, a ship might call at Halifax and Saint John in Canada, before crossing the Atlantic heading for Bilbao in northern Spain (Fig 6). From there, it would travel onwards past Gibraltar and into Barcelona. From then on, it was a dash through the Suez Canal at Port Said, heading for Colombo in Sri Lanka (Fig 7).

From Colombo, the ships would sail to Singapore, Labuan, Penang, Pelebohan Kelang (now Port Klang), Manila, Bangkok, and on to the Chinese mainland at Hong Kong, eventually reaching Busan, the Taiwan ports of Keelung and Kaohsing, before then reaching the end of the circumference at Japan (Fig 8). Japanese ports would include Yokohama, Kobe and Nagoya before crossing the Pacific and beginning the whole circle again at the ports in Canada.

Each vessel would call at a list of ports in each circumnavigation of the globe and, as mentioned, no two voyages would be the same as at times smaller ports were included and larger ones were excluded (Fig 9).

In order to man these vessels, crews would be flown out to meet the ships at various ports where the crews would change and one master and his officers would fly back to Britain and an incoming master and his officers come in and take over, in most cases the rest of the crew would sail on and go ashore at the nearest port to where they all lived, so Indian seaman would disembark at Colombo and Chinese crew at Hong Kong. As they would have to pay their own travel expenses, this was much cheaper than flying around the globe, especially when their wages were not that high.

The end of the service

By 1980, the writing was not just on the wall but all over the building. All eight of the vessels were withdrawn from the Barber Blue Sea round-the-world route and all eight were disposed of for the best possible price that could be attained within three years. Four of the class went to C Y Tung of Hong Kong (the gentleman that bought the RMS *Queen Elizabeth*, only to see it burn and sink in Hong Kong harbour as the *Seawise University*). They were the *Priam* (renamed the MV *Oriental Champion*), *Peisander* (MV *Oriental Exporter*), *Protesilaus* (MV *Oriental Importer*) and *Prometheus* (MV *Oriental Merchant*). Two others went to Saudi interests (the *Phrontis* and the *Patroclus*), while the last pair were sold to China Navigation (John Swire) for further trading in the Pacific, the *Perseus* as the MV *Kwangsi* and the *Phemius* as the MV *Kweichow*.

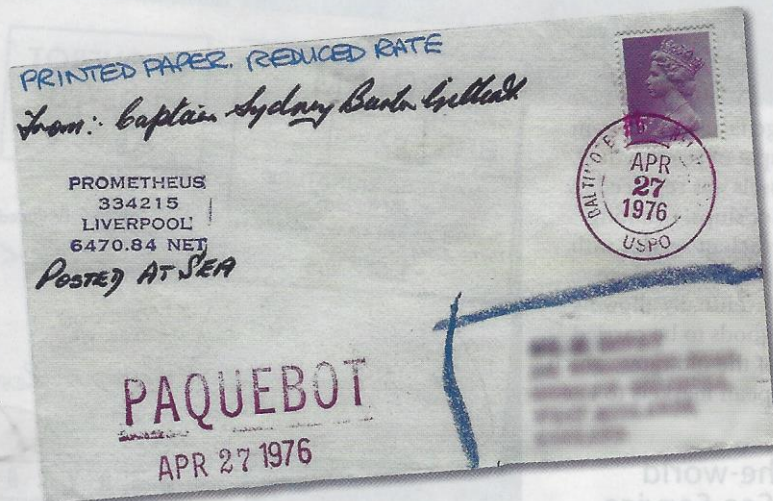


Fig 5 A cover posted on MV *Prometheus* cancelled by a paquebot at Baltimore on the east coast of the USA

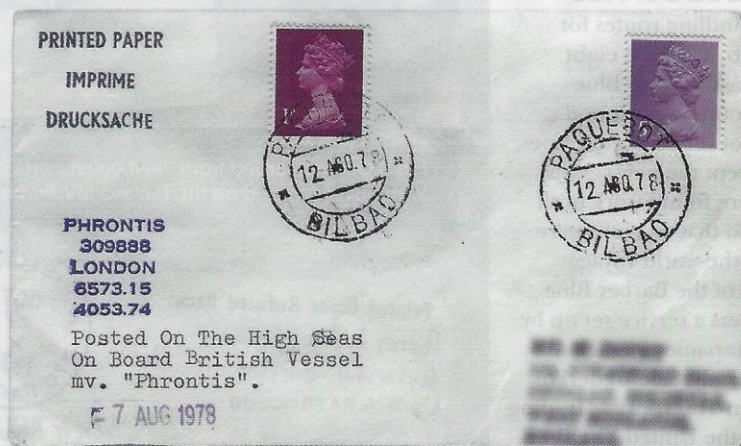


Fig 6 A cover posted on MV *Phrontis* travelling from the west coast to the east coast of the USA, up to Canada and across the Atlantic to Spain. The paquebot marks shown is for Bilbao in northern Spain

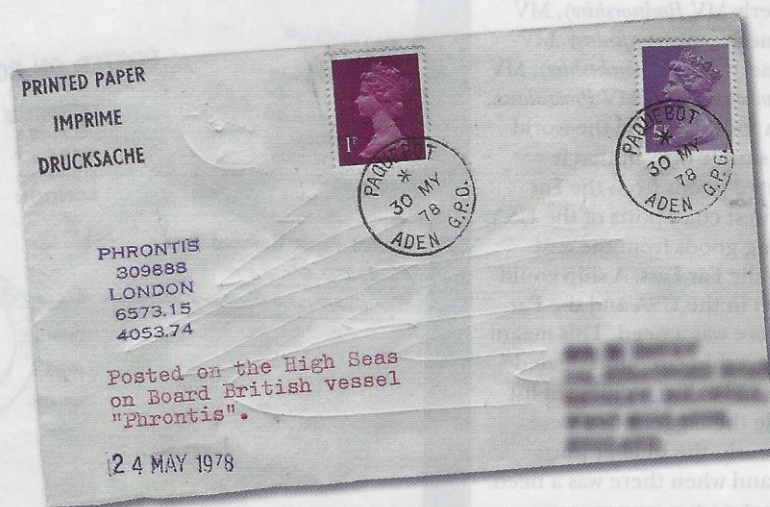


Fig 7 A cover posted on MV *Phrontis* travelling from Canada to Spain, through the Mediterranean and the Suez and then to Malaysia. This cover received a Paquebot mark at Aden

Alas, while the design was revolutionary for Blue Funnel and Ocean Fleets, by the time they were commissioned into service they were already going out of date and they got caught up in the biggest revolution in shipping that has ever happened and in such a short period of time. In the UK, only Manchester Liners really took up the gauntlet of containerisation and tried to get ahead of the game and even they, as part of the Furness Withy business, got sold down the river (to coin a phrase), when C Y Tung (again) took over the whole of Furness Withy in one swoop. It is hard to digest that when Ocean Fleets introduced their eight new P-class vessels in 1966–67 in a blaze of glory, within 15 years nearly their entire fleet would be wiped out, all due to a total lack of foresight that seemed to be the norm with many of the world's biggest fleets at the time.

A collectors' gamble

You don't get these covers in the same way that f.d.c.s and special handstamp covers are produced or even TPO (railway) covers are obtained. For f.d.c.s. and special handstamp

covers, you just queue up in a post office and ask or post the items to an address for servicing. In the case of the TPO covers, you could pop the covers in the letterbox of the mail carriage. In all of these aspects of creating covers, you were guaranteed a final cover with a nice postmark. However, with post-1950 paquebot covers, a collector had to write to a ship in the hope that the master would look on the request favourably and handle the covers by adding the ship name to the envelopes and dropping them off at a designated port or even any port of his own choice. If you were really lucky then the master would post a series of covers following the first request. Any resulting cover was totally at the behest and good auspices of the master or officer on board the vessel. If any one of them did not want to service your request, then your covers ended up in the bin.

I was most fortunate in the fact that during the 1970s, when these vessels were on the Barber Blue Sea route, I had the fortune to know a number of masters who commanded these ships on this around the world sailing. I am deeply indebted for the superb help and consideration shown to me in my quest for covers from these masters, as I am sure are the other collectors who sought and got help. The masters received no commercial gain for their help, just the knowledge that someone out there cared about their vessels and the shipping companies they worked for. Captain Claude Hill posted for me from five of the eight vessels, Captain Sydney Barton-Gilliat posted from six of the eight, and Captain Dave McCaffrey managed three of them. All of them posted from other ships of the fleet as well. Besides these, three masters and many other captains and ships' officers posted either just the once or more but alas there is not enough room to mention them all, suffice to say they all have my deepest thanks, for without them there would be nothing.

In a five-year span, I collected some 400 covers from the eight ships on this route, with postings from well over the 80 covers in the title and all of the covers shown in this article are really just a sample of the total. In the case of the MV *Phemius*, the resulting covers show the ship circumnavigating the globe five times.

And what happened to all of these conventional vessels? By around 1969, when the first container ships came into being, a single new container vessel replaced five conventional ships, and then ten, and within five years, a new generation of bigger designed container ships were replacing up to 25 conventional ships each, some of which were converted to carry maybe 150 to 200 containers.

Another 30 years have passed and



Fig 8 From Malaysia, the ship would travel through Indonesia and on to Taiwan. From Taiwan through to Japan and then across the Pacific to Vancouver to begin the circumnavigation again. The paquebot marks shown are Keelung, Taiwan (posted on the MV *Perseus*) and Nagoya, Japan (MV *Phemius*)

All covers shown reduced

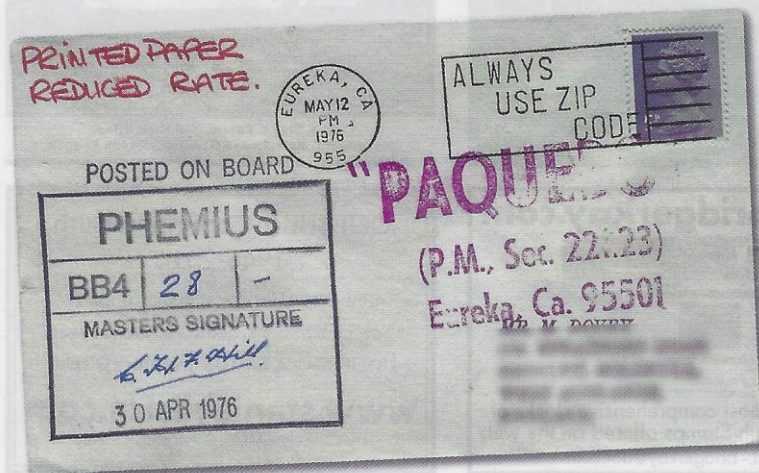


Fig 9 A cover posted on MV *Phemius* with a paquebot cancel for Eureka, California, a smaller port on the west coast of the USA

the latest generation of container ships dwarf the original ones, so that each new ship replaces, in effect, what would be a whole shipping line, especially when we now have ships that are the norm if they carry 12,000 containers with newer vessels now up to 16,000 units. It is no wonder so much is now imported from China and the Far East when such ships can do the work of so many conventional vessels and at a fraction of the cost and with faster turnarounds and voyages.

If only we still had our eight P-class Blue Funnel vessels then maybe Hornby trains would still be made in England and Longbridge would still be making Rover cars, Raleigh cycles would clutter the streets in Nottingham and Liverpool would be a bigger port than Felixstowe!

The TPO & Seapost Society

Mike Dovey is a member of the TPO & SEAPOST Society. You may email the society at: TPO_Seapost@Hotmail.com

The Society has published a book and a DVD shown on the right. For details of how to obtain a copy, please contact the Society at the above address.

