

Southampton Passenger Ships and Docks

6th April 2023 - Memorial Hall

Jake Simpkin gave a well-illustrated presentation that looked back with nostalgia at some of Southampton's most famous passenger liners and cruise ships, plus the growth and development of Southampton Docks.

He started by showing some of the current ships using the docks and explained the difference between liners and cruise ships. Liners had long strong hulls with a pointed bow that took passengers from A to B, while cruise ships are used for shorter distances and less in winter, as they are primarily used for entertainment. Today cruise ship's hulls are more bulbous and top heavy.

The foundation stone of Southampton Docks was laid in 1838 and Jake showed using maps how subsequently four different docks were developed. He said prior to this, the first steam ship in the Solent was in 1815 and the first cross-channel service to France, Le Havre, was in 1824. The first steamship crossed the Atlantic in 1840 and at that time it took 18 days but by the 1950s a liner could do it in 3½ days.

It was the railway line from London to Southampton opened in 1840 that led to the development and importance of the docks at Southampton. Jake then described how the ships developed from the SS Great Britain to the SS New York the first twin screw trans-Atlantic vessel in the 1890s. During this period there was a great growth in crossing the Atlantic and all these ships were liners. The first cruise ship was in 1891 and included extra facilities such as a gymnasium.

Jake went on to the period of great competition between the White Star Line and Cunard including their ships the Olympic, Titanic and Britannic and the Cunard Lusitania, Mauritania and Aquitania. By the 1920s ships were changing from coal to oil power and in the 1930s the new Western Docks were opened on reclaimed land outside of the old city walls.

The docks had railway lines running to the water's edge that aided the passengers and cargos to the ships. When describing the development of the docks, the dry docks and floating docks were mentioned, some being at their time the biggest in the world.

The next era was of the great liners the Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth. These ships greatly helped the war effort transporting troops. Post war the Union Castle vessels such as Windsor Castle could be relied on for their regular leaving times and the fastest trans-Atlantic liner was the SS United States.

By the 1960s aircraft were taking away passengers from the liners that led to their demise but the cruise industry was becoming more important. At this time half of the crews of these ships lived in Southampton but afterwards with the increase in cruise ships cheaper foreign crews took over particularly from the Philippines. Jake told of the various cruise terminals that were built to serve these pleasure passengers, plus the notable ships of their time the Canberra and QE2. Today Southampton is the biggest cruise port in Europe and has 28% of the cruise market.

Another very professional and interesting talk from Jake, that everyone enjoyed.