

Furness Bermuda Line and two pairs of Sisters

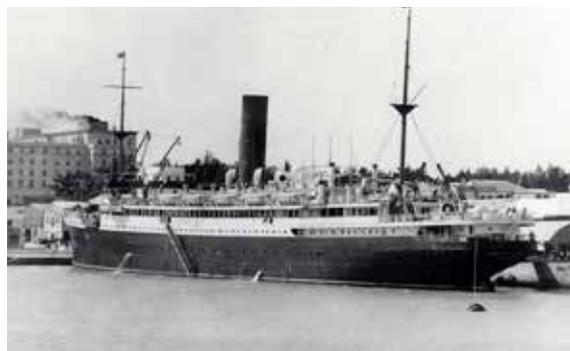
by Allen Soares



In 1919 Furness, Withy and Company was awarded the mail contract for the New York to Bermuda run and, in the same year, took over the Bermuda service from the Quebec Steamship Company, which had been operating services to Bermuda, initially from Canada as the Quebec and Gulf Ports Steamship Company, since 1874. The company had been renamed as the Quebec Steamship Company in 1880 and subsequently, in 1913, was taken over by Canada Steamship Lines, but continued to trade in its own name. The Furness Bermuda Line, as it became, operated for 47 years until 23 November 1966 when the *Queen of Bermuda*, the last of the sister ships, left for the final time.

Furness Bermuda Line started service with the Quebec Steamship Company's *Bermudian*, which

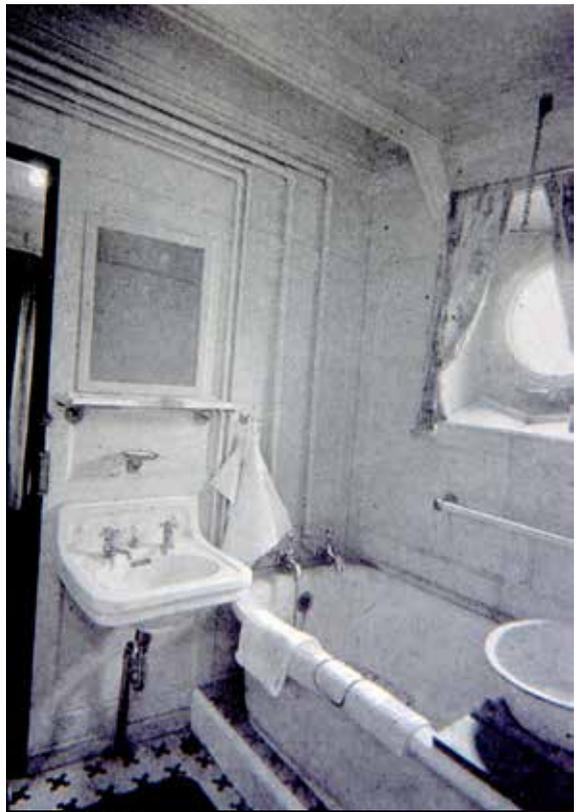
was built in 1904 and renamed in 1920 as the *Fort Hamilton*. The ship had a gross tonnage of 5,530 and carried 263 first class and 42 second class passengers. She had a length of 435 feet, a beam of 50 feet, and operated at a service speed of 18 knots. The company soon added the first of a pair of sister ships, the *Fort Victoria*, which had been built by Wm. Beardmore & Company Limited in Glasgow in 1913 as the *Willochra* for the Adelaide Steamship Company. With a gross tonnage of 7,784, she carried 380 passengers in first class and 50 in second class. She measured 427 feet by 56 feet and had a service speed of 16 knots. *Willochra* was followed from the same source by sister ship *Wandilla*, dating from 1911, renamed as the *Fort St. George*. She had a gross tonnage of 7,785 and carried 262 first class and 15 second class passengers. The



Furness Bermuda Line was clearly a great success, carrying 22,000 passengers during its first year of operation. By 1920 Furness realised the need for more hotel accommodation for its passengers while in Bermuda (passengers generally disembarked and stayed ashore for the duration of their visit), so the St. George Hotel was purchased and then improved in many areas, with the addition of new rooms, a swimming pool and a golf course. The 200 gross ton tender *Bermudian*, formerly the *Arctic Whale*, built in 1915, was acquired for transporting passengers from the ship to the hotel. Shortly thereafter Furness formed the Bermuda Development Company Ltd., acquiring 645 acres of land at Tuckers Town. This property became the Mid Ocean Club and golf course, and was completed in 1923. The following year the Hotel Bermudiana was constructed in Hamilton and finally a larger, 287 room, hotel was built in Tuckers Town, which opened 1931 as the Castle Harbour Hotel and golf course.

Furness, Withy and Company invested a great deal in the tourist and holiday trade in Bermuda and, during these years of hotel development, ordered a new ship with the largest dimensions that could enter Hamilton Harbour at the time. Harland & Wolff in Belfast laid the keel on 13 October 1926, and the ship was launched on 28 July 1928. The motor vessel *Bermuda* was 19,086grt and had accommodation for 616 first class and 75 second class passengers. She was 547 feet long, had a beam of 74 feet, and offered a service speed of 17 knots. An order was also placed with Blythwood Shipbuilding Company for another, but larger, tender. The 730grt *Mid Ocean* was completed in 1929 and renamed *Castle Harbour* during the following year.

Meanwhile, on one fateful voyage, the *Fort Victoria* left her pier in New York on 18 December 1929, with 206 passengers. At 4:00 pm she had

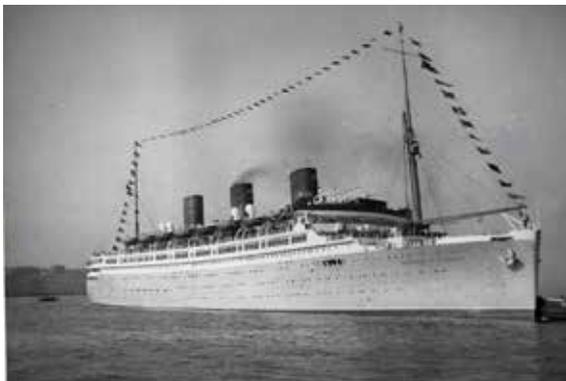




the *Bermuda*. The new ship was to be slightly larger and employ turbo-electric propulsion. Unbeknown to Furness, Withy & Company at the time, she would become first of the second set of sister ships. The *Monarch of Bermuda* was launched within a year of the signing of the contract, on 17 March 1931.

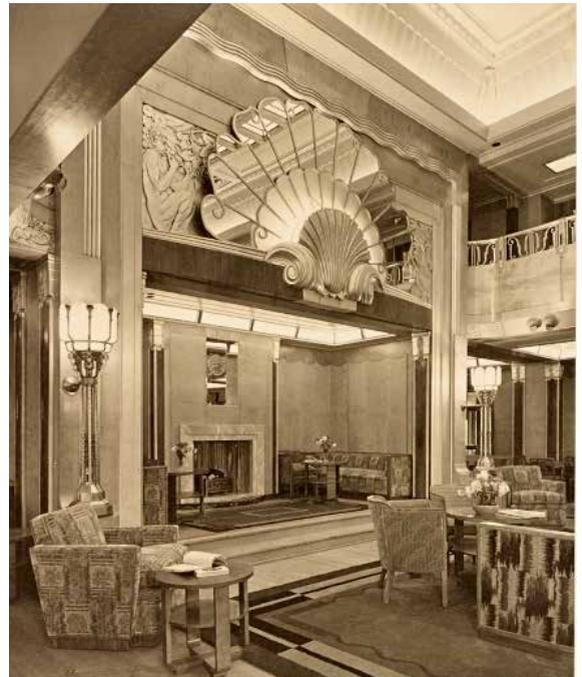
There was more misfortune for the Furness Bermuda Line when, in the early hours of Wednesday 17 June 1931, a disastrous fire broke out onboard the *Bermuda* while at the dock in Hamilton. Fortunately there was only one passenger on the ship at the time, Mrs. Shipley Dixon. Earlier, Captain Jeffries Davis and friends, including Mrs. Dixon, had been enjoying the evening at the Belmont Hotel. Upon leaving the Belmont around 11:45 pm, Mrs. Dixon decided to stay in Hamilton, rather than trying to go all the way to Tuckers Town by horse and carriage at that hour of night. She telephoned Pomander Gate Guest House, but found they were closed. Captain Davis suggested that the simplest thing she could do was to go on board and spend the night in the room, which had been allotted to her for the voyage back to New York the next day. Arriving back at the ship around 12:30am, the captain saw her to her cabin B-139 and then went to his quarters on the bridge. Mrs. Dixon was awakened by the smell of smoke and, upon opening her door, the cabin started to fill with heavy smoke. She closed the door and climbed up on the washstand, which was under the porthole, clambered out, and dropped 35 feet into the water before swimming to the ferry terminal near the bow of the ship. There was just one fatality that morning - the assistant barber Mr. Helme, who was believed to have been sleeping on a sofa in the Barber Shop. The *Bermuda* had settled on the shallow harbour floor by the morning, after Captain Davis gave instructions to fill all of the double bottom tanks as a preliminary aid to stability. Consequently, as long as they could keep her listed towards the dock, she would rest on the starboard underbody when grounded. Oil was

stopped at the entrance to the Ambrose Channel in heavy fog to drop off her pilot when, out of the grey clouds, the Clyde liner *Algonquin*, sliced into her port side. All of the passengers and crew were safely evacuated, but by 7:30 pm the *Fort Victoria* had slipped beneath the waves. The wreck was left obstructing the Ambrose Channel and, shortly afterwards, was blown up. Following the loss, Furness secured the charter of the *Veendam* from Holland America Line but, within three months, the company had placed an order for another new ship. A contract was signed on 30 March 1930 with Vickers-Armstrong at Newcastle upon Tyne for a suitable companion to run alongside





Previous pages: Queen of Bermuda on sea trials in 1933 - from a Stephen Card painting. Fort Hamilton and the Fort St George. Fort Victoria: bathroom, cabins and Dining Room. Opposite: 1931 Monarch of Bermuda brochure; maiden voyage, first arrival in Hamilton. This page: Monarch of Bermuda from a postcard, below: 'A' deck entrance & Library; right: Lounge, Verandah Cafe and Wing Cafe.

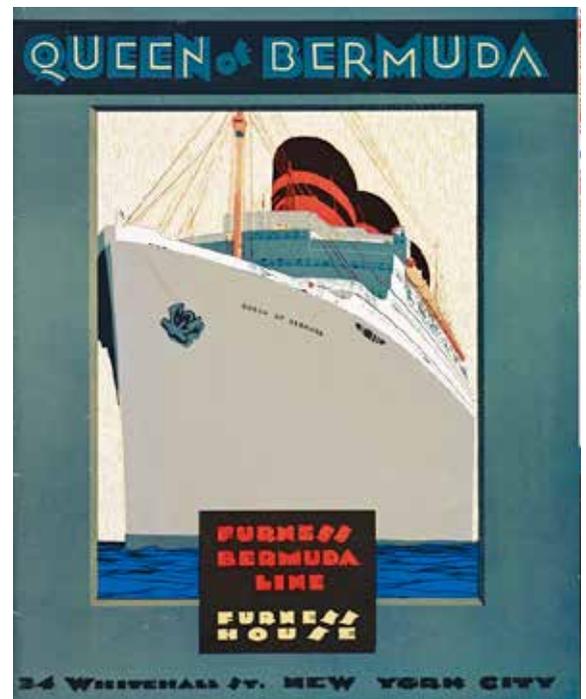




transferred from side to side when the tide rose and fell to maintain a list to starboard, as it was possible that if she listed to the port during high tide she would roll over. The fire was finally contained at 9:00 pm on the 18 June.

Following an inspection of the extensive damage, Furness decided that the liner could be repaired, and arrangements were soon finalised

for her to return to her builder's yard in Belfast. After basic repairs had been effected, including the installation of a temporary bridge, the *Bermuda* left Hamilton on 6 July under her own power, arriving at Belfast on 14 July. Within three days of the fire on the *Bermuda* an agreement was signed, on 20 June 1931, to charter the *Franconia* from the Cunard Line. Her first voyage commenced on 11 July.





Back in Belfast, repairs to the *Bermuda* had been proceeding quickly but, on 19 November, while the *Monarch of Bermuda* was on her maiden voyage from England to New York, news was received that the *Bermuda* had caught fire again. The fire raged through the night and caused damage far more extensive than the previous fire in June with almost the entire interior being gutted. During the morning of 20 November the *Bermuda* was flooded and allowed to settle on the bottom; this time she was a total loss as the new upper works had been totally destroyed and the hull had been damaged beyond repair. Shortly thereafter she was raised and the engines, which had survived almost intact, were removed. The wreck was sold to shipbreakers but, whilst under tow from Belfast to Rosyth to be scrapped, the tow line snapped in heavy weather and the *Bermuda* drifted ashore on the Scottish coast. The wreck was left there, eventually smashed to pieces by heavy seas and gradually rusted away.



The *Monarch of Bermuda* was the largest ship to date to serve the Bermuda route for Furness Bermuda Line. Her gross tonnage was 22,424, and she was 579 feet long by 76 feet wide, still size-constrained by the approach channel to Hamilton Harbour. She carried 830 first class passengers, although 32 of these places could be used for second class accommodation if necessary. A larger and improved version of the *Bermuda*, though of a similar general design, the *Monarch of Bermuda* had a service speed of 19.5 knots. She sailed from New York on her first voyage to Bermuda on 28 November, under the command of Captain Harry Jeffries Davis. It was an overcast day, but thousands turned out to see her leave. She created a new record for the voyage, 33



Opposite: *Monarch of Bermuda*'s Smoke Room and early 1930s publicity material. Above: *Queen of Bermuda* entering New York for the first time led by *Monarch of Bermuda*. Right: *Queen of Bermuda* - Promenade Deck, Ballroom, Smoke Room and a suite.



hours and 35 minutes, at an average speed of 19.85 knots, beating the previous record of 36 hours and 25 minutes, which was held by the American liner, *Pan America*. Coincidentally the *Pan America* was at dock in Hamilton when the *Monarch of Bermuda* arrived on her maiden voyage on 30 November 1931. It was a gala occasion for Bermudians and there was no doubt that Bermuda had a ship of which it could be very proud.

The last charter voyage left Bermuda on New Year's Day 1932, leaving the *Monarch of Bermuda* to serve the Bermuda trade on her own until a consort was built. During the summer months, from August through to the end of October, Furness chartered the *Franconia* once again to help the *Monarch of Bermuda* with the heavy booking experienced on the New York to Bermuda service. In February and March 1933, Furness chartered the *Duchess of Bedford* from Canadian Pacific to assist on the trade.

Within days of the *Bermuda* being declared a total loss, Furness Bermuda Line placed an order with Vickers-Armstrong to build a sister ship to the *Monarch of Bermuda*, to be named *Queen of Bermuda*. On 15 December 1931 her keel was laid at the Barrow-in-Furness shipyard.

Lady Cubitt, the wife of the Governor of Bermuda, launched the *Queen of Bermuda* on 1 September 1932. The ship left the Clyde on 21 February 1933 on her maiden voyage to New York. It had been arranged for her older sister, the *Monarch of Bermuda*, to meet her off New York and lead the *Queen of Bermuda* up the Hudson River to the Furness Bermuda Line Pier 95 at the foot of West 55th street. Very similar in size to her sister, the *Queen* had a gross tonnage of 22,575, and measured 580 feet by 76 feet. She carried 700 first class and 31 second class passengers, and had a service speed 19.5 knots.

The maiden voyage of the *Queen of Bermuda* to Bermuda was adversely affected by bad weather, so there was no attempt to create a new speed record. A flotilla of small craft gathered to welcome her inaugural arrival in Bermuda on 9 March, with every vantage point ashore thronging with people anxious to get their first glimpse of the new liner. Thousands more packed Albuoy's Point and Front Street in Hamilton to watch her berth at No. 1 Dock.

The sisters *Monarch of Bermuda* and *Queen of Bermuda* were two of the most outstanding vessels of their day and they quickly attracted a following among wealthy American travellers. It was not surprising that they became known as the "Millionaires' Ships", in part due to their lavish fittings. They were the first ships to have bathrooms and telephones in every cabin, a real luxury at that



time. Between them they carried 34,102 passengers from New York to Bermuda in 1933. In those days all the passengers would disembark and stay in hotels. During the off-season, one of the sisters would go off cruising, with short voyages to the Caribbean or Cuba and sometimes longer trips, such as a 35-day voyage around South America. Both ships were well suited for longer voyages.

It wasn't all plain sailing though as, on one occasion, the *Monarch of Bermuda* responded to an SOS call from the *Morro Castle*, which was on fire off the coast of New Jersey. It was 8 September 1934 and the *Monarch of Bermuda* managed to rescue 71 survivors from the sea, but also picked up a number of bodies of the victims of the disaster. The *Morro Castle* had 555 people onboard at the time and 133 died in the incident.

The demand for passenger space on the two Furness liners was so great that they could not accommodate all of the people that wanted to travel to Bermuda on them, especially in the period around Easter 1938. Once again Furness Bermuda Line arranged a charter using the *Georgic* from Cunard White Star Line. The following year Furness chartered the *Lancastria* to help for a few weeks during the Easter period.

With the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939 the two British-registered ships were soon requisitioned for war service. This called a halt, for the time being, to the company's Bermuda passenger service. The islanders were thereafter reliant on the services of the American War Shipping Administration and two small ships with limited passenger capacity chartered by Furness. The first sister to go east was





the *Queen of Bermuda*, leaving Hamilton for New York on 28 August 1939, and not returning to Bermuda for ten years. After disembarking her passengers, she left New York on Thursday 31 August, under orders to cross the Atlantic at top speed. Halfway across, on 3 September, war was declared and the ship arrived at Belfast on 8 September for conversion for war service. Within a day, her luxurious interior was being gutted, her decks were strengthened to allow for the installation of seven six-inch guns, and she became an Armed Merchant Cruiser. To start with her primary duty involved patrolling the South Atlantic, and as such the *Queen of Bermuda* was the largest ship to enter Deception Bay in the Antarctic. In 1941 during a refit at Newport News her third funnel was removed to make identification by the enemy more difficult. By 1943 the *Queen of Bermuda* was used more and more as a troopship and, in one notable convoy, she linked up with the *Queen Mary*, *Nieuw Amsterdam*, *Ile de France*, and *Aquitania*. As a troopship the *Queen of Bermuda* sailed 192,000 miles, and carried 97,000 troops.

The *Monarch of Bermuda* left Bermuda for the last time on 13 September 1939, and was laid up for safety in Brooklyn until a decision could be made on her future. On 29 November 1939 the *Monarch of Bermuda* was requisitioned for service as a troopship and ordered to sail for Liverpool for refit. On her way she stopped at Halifax where she embarked 962 troops, who must have thought they had hit the jackpot because the ship still had all of her first class accommodation intact. From Halifax the *Monarch of Bermuda* joined a convoy that also included the *Andes*, *Empress of Britain*, *Empress of Australia*, and the *Duchess of Bedford*, the last of which was carrying the first contingent of Canadian troops to Europe. After her conversion into a troopship, the *Monarch of Bermuda* travelled 420,512 miles carrying 164,840 troops and other passengers. Released from her military service in July 1946, she was sent to the Palmer shipyard at Hebburn-on-Tyne, to be restored to her pre-war first

class condition by Vickers – Armstrong, her original builder. Unfortunately, fire struck the company once again when she was in the final stages of internal work being completed in dry-dock. On 24 March 1947 the fire patrol posted aboard the ship, discovered a fire in a public room around 4:20am. Within 9 minutes the National Fire Service was on hand, along with a tug with firefighting apparatus. Despite all their efforts the fire, fanned by the strong wind, swept rapidly through the ship's superstructure and soon spread to the lower decks. The *Monarch of Bermuda* was now just a scorched wreck, sitting upright in the half-flooded dry dock. As a constructive total loss she was abandoned to the underwriters and moved to Rosyth where she was laid up. Eventually the British and Australian governments jointly purchased her for rebuilding as an emigrant ship and she re-entered service, but now between England and Australia as the *New Australia* on 15 August 1950. After many years, she was sold again, in 1958, to the Greek Line and renamed *Arkadia*.

Within three months of the loss of the *Monarch of Bermuda*, her sister, the *Queen of Bermuda*, was released from her trooping duties by the British Government. This was just the start of a 20 month and 3 million pound extensive refit, restoring the liner to her pre-war glory. She re-entered the Bermuda





Previous pages: Queen of Bermuda's Gym. Monarch of Bermuda as a 'Diplomat Ship' and as a troopship. Opposite: Queen of Bermuda as an Armed Merchant Cruiser in New York and on the Mersey. Lower picture: sailing after her postwar restoration to passenger service. This page: postwar 'B' deck cabin and aft sun deck.





Above: The Queen's last Master - Captain Musson.

Below: 1950s poster

Opposite top: Queen of Bermuda with a single funnel after her 1961 refit.

Opposite, bottom: Queen of Bermuda being scrapped at Faslane in December 1966.



service on Valentine's Day 14 February 1947 and, with a flotilla of small boats around her, the *Queen of Bermuda* was escorted back into Hamilton Harbour. She was soon joined, in May 1951, by the replacement for her sister - a smaller, very modern looking ship, the 13,654-grt *Ocean Monarch*. These ships went on to serve the Bermuda passenger service for many years. In the spring of 1962 the *Queen of Bermuda* returned to Bermuda after a major refit that left her with just one funnel. This made the *Queen of Bermuda* the only passenger ship in history to serve with three funnels, then with two funnels, and finally with one funnel.

Times were changing for the passenger shipping industry, and not for the better. With the advent of the jet age in air travel, and the advancing years of the *Queen of Bermuda*, keeping up was difficult. The rising cost of operations along with the increasingly strict safety standards that were enforced by the US Coast Guard meant that the *Ocean Monarch* would also require a substantial refit in order to remain in service. Furness decided to terminate completely their North American cruise operations in 1966. The first ship to go was the *Ocean Monarch*. After serving Bermuda for fifteen years and carrying hundreds of thousands of passengers, she left Bermuda on 30 August 1966 for the last time and went into lay up in the River Fal in England to await a potential buyer. A Balkanturist Co. of Bulgaria, secured the purchase from Furness Withy & Co. in August 1967, and she was renamed *Varna*. She changed hands several times in the seventies and on 28 May 1981, while



registered as the *Reina del Mar*, she caught fire while being refitted at Perama, near Piraeus. The initial engine room fire soon spread to other areas and she eventually capsized. The ship became a total loss, a sad end for such a fine little liner.

The *Queen of Bermuda* left Bermuda for the last time on 23 November 1966 and, after disembarking her passengers in New York, she

sailed for Faslane, stopping in Halifax to drop off a crew member who was badly burned from a grease fire while cooking. The *Queen of Bermuda* arrived in Scotland on 6 December, where demolition commenced almost immediately. Her former sister, once the *Monarch of Bermuda* arrived in Valencia, Spain on 18 December 1966 to be broken up. It truly was the end of an era.

