

Of liner lords, bulker barons and maritime London

"WHEN I began in shipping" muses Bruce Farthing, "you wouldn't have seen top British owners trooping down to Whitehall looking for tonnage taxes."

Farthing, who retires as consultant director of the dry cargo owners' association Intercargo this summer, will have been 40 years in the industry this September. He can look back at a career which has seen him close to the policy centres and personalities of both UK and international shipping for much of this time.

A keen and experienced yachtsman from his time in the army and university, Farthing entered the shipping industry almost by accident in 1959, when practising in the government legal service, by simply replying to an advertisement from the UK Chamber of Shipping, which was looking for a lawyer.

It was a world as different to that of today as it could possibly be imagined, the British shipping industry enormous and influential, appropriately filled with powerful personalities.

Chiefly engaged with legal and parliamentary issues, he found himself secretary of a national and international committee on shipping documentation, which required certain diplomatic skills as the lines championed their own 'personalised' documents.

But the regulatory clouds that were to menace the conference lines were beginning to gather and Farthing was to be deeply involved in the jurisdictional conflicts with the US, where the Federal Maritime Commission was acquiring new regulatory teeth it was anxious to test.

Throughout the 1960s, the defence of the conference lines against the challenge of regulators and increasingly powerful shippers' organisations was to become almost a full time job.

Bruce Farthing, who is retiring from Intercargo, talks to Michael Grey about his career in shipping policy

Indeed, with this accumulated expertise, in 1967 Farthing was appointed secretary of the Committee of European Shipowners, which was later to become the Council of European and Japanese National Association (Censa).

During this important period, liner shipping companies (curiously bulk and tankers rarely entered the arena) were engaged in defending the principles of the conference against the attacks of regulators, efforts of shippers' organisations and the new maritime ambitions of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development — 'Unctaddery' with new demands for bigger shares of sea trade.

Sir John Nicholson, chairman of the Ocean Group, was to describe Farthing as the "principal professional advocate for western shipowners in all the turgid debates leading to the UN Convention on a Code of Practice for Liner Conferences".

There were battles over the Liner Code and its 40-40-20 sharing of trade, years of combat over the open registers and ferocious international debates about the incursions being made by Soviet shipping with its "unfair" cost structures.

Then there were the emerging powers of Brussels.

In all of these major debates, it is significant that a dominant part was played by major British shipowners; "world figures" they were, recalls Farthing, who remembers working for these 'liner lords' as "quite an experi-



Farthing: still fighting under the colours of an industry he joined 40 years ago

ence." Endless debates in Washington, Tokyo, and committee rooms in London and Geneva, days locked in meetings in Brussels, with unyielding Soviet bureaucrats in Moscow and the Black Sea was the lot of Censa delegations during those years.

Farthing recalls the incredible sound and fury that was generated in shipping circles by these issues, as the liner lords saw their captive markets threatened by regulators and new shipping interests.

There were additional responsibilities in 1976 when Farthing became rapporteur of the Maritime Transport Committee of the Paris based International Chamber of Commerce.

He was to hold this position, along with the chairmanship of the ICC Shipping

Policy Committee for 20 years.

In the same year he returned to the UK owners' organisation, which was changing itself into the General Council of British Shipping, as deputy director general.

Blocked for the director-general's job in 1983 as the owners turned to Whitehall for their leadership, Farthing left the Chamber, thinking that he would be unlikely to find another role in shipping.

However, Anthony Chandris, who he had met when the shipowner was championing the Greek ambitions in liner shipping, was anxious for some heavyweight help with the newly formed Intercargo. Farthing joined the new organisation as consultant director, supporting the very different clientele of its dry bulk shipping members.

Here, the role was very different from that in the large (albeit shrinking) British owners' body, nurturing a small organisation, and encouraging new members to join, while using his international contacts to ensure that Intercargo punched above its weight and acquired a high profile.

There was no history of dry bulk owners working together and Farthing believes that acquainting these independently minded tramp owners of the advantages of co-operation has been very useful.

With a career divided between British and overseas shipowning interests, Farthing clearly regrets the passing of the 'big names' and a shipping industry that was publicly recognised as nationally and internationally significant.

He suggests that the great British retreat from shipping in the 1980s was a consequence of so many of the great family companies going public, henceforth under the thumb of shareholders and influential analysts, unprepared for the risk taking that remains such an integral part of shipping and inevitably driven by short term objectives.

Perhaps British shipping was protected, but somehow those operators, who were so confident in the past, "lost the willingness to take risks", as Leadenhall Street ceased to be the centre of world shipping.

Farthing also believes, in retrospect, that many of the problems with recalcitrant shippers have been a consequence of the way that these cargo providers were treated by the companies and conferences in the heady days of the 1950s and 1960s. So perhaps we can learn something from history.

Bruce Farthing is winding down his trade organisation career, but as an elected member of the Court of Common Council in the Corporation of London, where he represents the Ward of Aldgate (the Shipping Ward), he champions the cause of shipping in the City.

He is anxious to promote the City as an international shipping centre for a new century and to maintain and enhance its reputation in this area.

He worries about the widespread ignorance about maritime matters, the assumptions that the City is only about "shuffling money" and that "most things travel by air nowadays".

The Maritime London Group, to which Bruce Farthing will now be able to apply more of his energies seeks to remind people that the City's prosperity grew out of ships and trade, and gathers together the 'cluster' of maritime interests to fight this vital corner.

Part promotional, part economic development, partly encouraging inward investment, the group will stress the importance both of London and of the UK in this internationally important industry. The next lord mayor is expected to be hugely supportive. A programme of maritime events is planned. Bruce Farthing, only partly retired, still fights under the colours of an industry he joined 40 years ago.

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