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Post WWII trans-Atlantic travel for business and pleasure: the Cunard shipping line and its airline competitors

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Introduction

Cunard established his eponymous shipping line in 1840 with the launch of the steam powered "Britannia" and a commitment to safety for its passengers.[1] Even though accidents did occur, it was the only company in the following seventy five years not to lose a passenger's life.[2] Whilst the first decades after 1840 became dominated by Cunard[3], new competitors such as the White Star line began to change the nature of the market. Harland, the ship builder behind this new line recognised that changing technology meant bigger ships and with increased size came advantages in comfort and speed.[4] In response, Cunard's reputation, built on safety and reliability, became associated with comfort, style and service. Everything was carefully tailored to the perceived tastes of its customers.[5] In the following decades through to the onset of World War II the designs of the larger liners were increasingly associated with luxury and comfort. As ship design developed so the luxury previously associated with First and Cabin Class percolated through to the other classes of the ship.[6] Ships of this period were described as "floating" or "travelling palaces".[7] During the interwar period – the "golden age of passenger shipping"[8] – trans-Atlantic liners became icons of national pride in terms of both design and speed. These changes took place within the confines of a market limited to one mode of transport and operating within a highly structured business framework. All the major lines belonged to the conference system which regulated their business, from fares and advertising through to the minutiae of on-board life.

The shipping lines came to see the Atlantic as their own: a space they controlled and one where the social mores of life ashore would be carefully maintained. Competition between the shipping lines centred on speed, comfort and style. Although the recklessness of the early years had long past,[9] lines still sought the accolade of the Blue Riband as holder of the fastest crossing.[10] Shipping companies portrayed their ships, especially for the elite passengers, as spacious, elegant venues, comparable to the best hotels so familiar to these people. The national pride associated these ships resulted in announcement of a new vessel provoking wide public debate. So, for example, the design of the ship "Queen Mary" raised many issues but, Cunard finally claimed, there was "much to marvel at … but nothing to mar the sense of serene comfort" with service to make passengers feel as "honoured guests".[11] One author described this ship as "the most popular ship of all time"[12] – a consequence of its speed (capturing the Blue Riband from the "Normandie"), service and design.

Against this background, when Pan American first flew across the Atlantic in 1939,[13] it used a Boeing 314 flying boat seating only thirty-six passengers (with a fare comparable to the more modern Concorde), Cunard and its competitors could well have imagined they could contain any threat to their businesses. However, post WWII, the development of commercial air travel with larger, faster planes would present a fundamentally different challenge to those the company had faced in previous decades.

Historians of Cunard and its competitors have, unsurprisingly, focussed on the ships in terms of design[14] and of the passengers' experience[15]. With the exception of work by Hyde,[16] Boyce[17] and more recently, Branchick,[18] little attention has been paid to the Cunard's engagement with the airline industry. How could Cunard counter to this emergent industry, one which devised its own market rules and gave a new focus to the concepts of time and comfort? Using meeting reports, correspondence, company publications and advertisements, this paper will examine how its well-established business influenced Cunard's view of the future. The paper considers the refurbishment of the fleet in the aftermath of World War II, the response to the growing airline industry and the long-term place of the ship in the highly competitive trans-Atlantic market. The three papers mentioned above consider aspects of Cunard's activities (Hyde and Boyce – economics and business and Branchick – marketing). This paper focusses on a particular period (1945 to the 1960s) in a more integrated approach, providing further insights into the changing market.

Setting the context: managing the Atlantic "space"

Cunard believed it best provided for its passengers by managing the space of the ship in a way that reflected the structures of the societies from whence its clientele was drawn. Wealleans,[19] describes the ship as

> A perfect representation of how people should be organised, how the ruling elite located their place in the world in relation to others, and how others were defined through their identity and place on the ship …

Using the ideas of Foucault,[20] she suggests the 'space' of the ship represented the prevailing view on how society should be ordered – a reflection of the wider world. People knew to which social class they belonged and could expect to pass their days in the company of people with similar backgrounds and interests.

Physical and procedural spaces combined to enforce the cultural space deemed appropriate by both company and passengers. Cunard gave, to quote Harvey,[21] a "power of place" to the ship, defining and controlling the social processes of everyday onboard life. Only bulkhead doors separated people of widely differing classes and the rules were, at least in part, to reassure the elite of First Class that they could expect respectable and appropriate behaviour amongst the proximate lower classes.[22] In the 1930s, if tourist third class passengers were found in cabin-class public rooms, pursers had "[to make] all reasonable efforts … to prevent passengers travelling in lower classes from making use of higher-public rooms and deck space".[23] Even in 1951 Cunard still requested Captains to discourage 1st-class passengers from inviting friends in other classes to dinner[24], "Whilst we are anxious to discourage these invitations … the captain has discretion to grant the necessary permission". The design of the ship provided a physical means of enforcement. When interaction was unavoidable, designers took steps to keep this to a minimum. For example, the cinema on the "Scythia", refitted in 1950, was built in First Class. Tourist passengers only gained access by a special staircase, thus preserving the exclusivity of the elite.[25]

As well as structuring the physical and cultural space of the Atlantic, so too the companies structured their ways of operating by means of the Atlantic Passenger Steamship Conference and the Trans-Atlantic Passenger Steamship Conference. These regulated the operations of the companies and the relationships they had with their ticket agents. The conferences classified ships and used this for annually setting minimum fares, a complex task which took account not just of cabin class but factors relating to individual ships – a First Class ticket on the Queen Mary cost more than that on many other ships. Lines were ever vigilant against a competitor reclassifying its cabins to gain the advantage of offering lower fares. Decision making was by unanimity, a slow process giving cause for disagreement between the lines. The system resulted in a very controlled form of competition: "competition pushed too far will only bring ruin and disaster" so that by "using a lot of common sense … it would be very easy for us to save tremendous sums of money in the running expenses of our vessels".[26] This management of competition was most obviously entrenched in the approach to advertising. Little changed between the rules laid down in 1933[27] and those in use in 1969.[28] Companies were not permitted to present their ships in a favourable light compared to their competitors. Advertising statements were to be limited to facts and "superlatives that are debatable may not be used". No concessions were to be made to a public that may not understand nautical terminology. Speeds of ship must be in "knots" and "no reference made to the word <<miles>>". The lines took these rules seriously, at least when challenging each other's activities.[29] For example, Cunard highlighted United States Lines' claim to "the fastest liner in the world" and Holland America tours being "the very best in pleasure travel". In contrast, its own advertising tested how far the rules could be stretched. A claim to have "the greatest ships in the world" prompted a letter from United States Lines. The ensuing correspondence suggests that by this time – 1966 – the strict structures of the Conference system were beginning to break down. "Greatest", said the company in its defence, "… can be thought to give people … a warm and comfortable feeling … [we are not claiming] to have the biggest or the newest ships”. The letter finishes with the statement, “we’re not alone in using superlatives” quoting examples from three other companies. Early the following year, Cunard wrote to the secretary of the Conference regarding the “greatest ships” claim, “[the Conference’s] advertising rules … are out of date and not following the trend of modern advertising practices”. In the face of growing airline competition, the shipping lines continued to complain about each other’s advertisements. At the same time their passengers were leaving for aeroplanes that, unsurprisingly, really did go faster.

The influence of the conference system extended to the minutiae of life at sea. For example, the 1930 revision of the rules banned theatrical entertainments and/or variety shows, limited the size of college orchestras to five members[30] and required “cinematographic entertainments … [to] be on a limited and modest scale”.[31] Companies could not engage “theatrical artistes” during the voyage[32] – presumably to stop passengers trying to subsidise their travel. By 1969 the number of people allowed in a college orchestra had been increased to six, but lines were still not allowed to give passengers free travel or reduced fares in exchange for providing entertainment. The number of “Professional theatrical entertainers [was] limited to six”, and, presumably because the Conference saw the hiring of well-known names as unacceptable competition, the “names of artistes will not be included in any publicity … before sailing”.[33]

By the 1960s the strains of having to reach consensus on all matters began to emerge. Considerable debate occurred over the relationship between shipping lines and their agents. As might be expected there was a standard rate of commission paid to agents tied into the conference system. Shipping lines paid a lower rate than the airlines even though their cumbersome booking systems took three or four times longer. Opinion within the Conference was divided. Whilst Cunard complained that “…members were seriously handicapped by not paying [the higher rate]”,[34] some American lines liked the unanimity rule as it “prevented travel agents playing one line against another”[35]. Eventually, though most lines wanted to increase commission rates, a minority was able to prevent any change. To escape this impasse, it might be thought Cunard could have simply left the Conference and negotiated its own agreements with the agents. However, the tieing system used by the Conference prevented agents selling tickets for non-Conference members, effectively locking them out of the market.

It was becoming clear that the Atlantic space, whether that be the experience of the passenger or the systems which underpinned their travel, was no longer in the tight grip of the shipping lines and the Conference system to which they belonged.

Cunard’s fleet: the impact of WWII and its aftermath

With the war over, Cunard sought to re-establish its business on a similar basis to that before the war with a fleet of ships (varying in size, luxury and speed) crossing the Atlantic to the USA and Canada combined with a programme of cruising. Of its pre-war fleet of twenty-three ships,[36] ten failed to return to service. The remaining ships were gradually refurbished. Fittings that had been in storage were reinstalled and the ship's interiors and facilities updated.[37] Pre-war, many ships had been fitted out in a mix of styles to the extent that one observer commented, "You may sleep in a bed depicting one ruler's fancy, breakfast under another dynasty altogether, …, play cards or smoke, or indulge in music under three other monarchs … and return to one of the [former] periods … for your dinner in the evening". [38] Ships' public and staterooms needed to keep pace with the changing times and the declining passenger taste for this extraordinary mix of styles. In the late 1940s Martin,[39] wrote of the newly refurbished "Britannic", "the number of ocean travellers who prefer the 100 per cent (sic) period apartment is so small as to be infinitesimal, and the ship owner need not attempt to cater for a minute minority". This change is well illustrated by the refitting of the "Britannic" smoking room (compare Figure 1 and Figure 2). Contemporary design, both in terms of form and materials, replaced historical pastiche. Other public rooms and cabins followed a consistent theme.

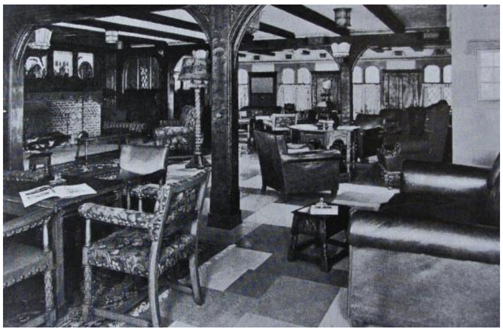

Figure 1 Smoking Room, "Britannic", 1930

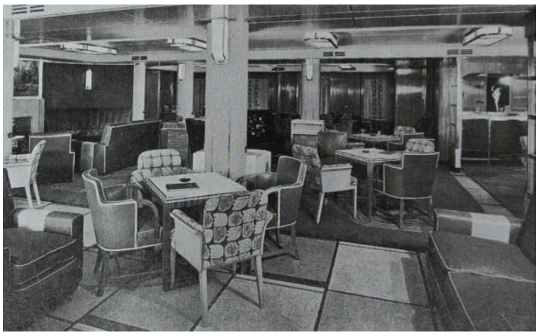

Figure 2 Smoking Room, "Britannic", 1948

Source: Cunard Archive, University of Liverpool, D42/PR4/16/3/4

Business began to return; in 1950 the company declared the "Caronia" and "Britannic" had "won a great following on the Atlantic and we commend to agents the qualities which have made them such popular cruising liners".[40] By 1951 the company considered it had a "well balanced fleet of eleven passenger liners … providing a variety of services and unsurpassed accommodation for travellers to and from the US and Canada".[41]

For a long period after WWII the "trans-Atlantic ferry" remained the major part of the business; as late as 1965 Cunard still carried over 160,000 passengers across the Atlantic and only 23,000 on cruises. In 1945 the design of a new ship similar to the "Mauretania" raised fundamental questions about the future balance between cruising and trans-Atlantic journeys. A ship built primarily for the latter needed three classes whilst a cruise ship might only need two classes. Should the new liner be smaller and aimed at cruising in waters calmer than the North Atlantic? The American office was very keen to have a really first-class cruise ship. In this debate many detailed design issues rose to the fore: window sizes and the glass to be glare repellent "as on Florida trains", the quality of launches for shore visits (fast, comfortable and with toilets) and lots of space on the forward observation deck –

"all passengers desire this location entering and leaving port". The choice for a smaller, lighter ship finally won the day[42] even though it would continue to cross the ocean on a regular basis.

In the mid-1950s, four new ships[43] serviced a growing Canadian trade. For the *Journal of Commerce,* one of these, the "Saxonia" was very much of its time. More modern styling,[44] similar to its sister ship the "Ivernia", replaced the baronial styles of the past. The "Ivernia" brochure[45] promoted its modernity, not just in the style of the furnishings (Figure 3) and cinema (able to show films "made by the new wide screen process") but also in social practices – the smoking room being open to both men and women. The trade press, quoting *Cunard News*,[46] praised the ship's design as giving "an impression of spaciousness and superlative comfort prevails …. The beginning of a new era in the history of the Cunard Line".

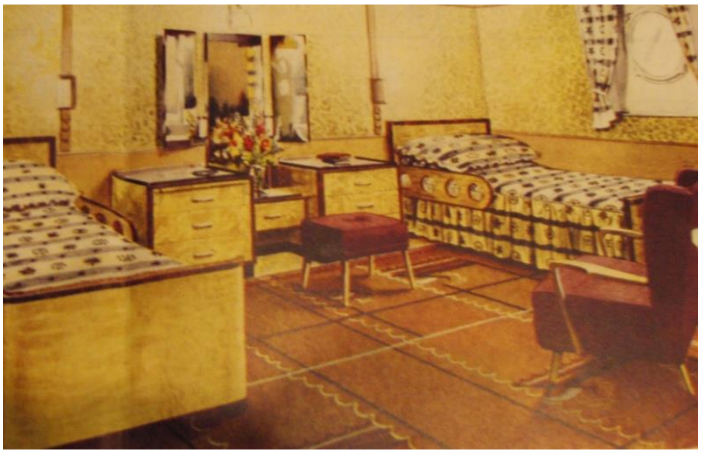

Figure 3 "Ivernia" First Class Stateroom, *c*. 1954

Source: Cunard Archive, University of Liverpool, D42/PR4/19/1/8

Similar issues to those considered in the replacement of the "Mauretania" came to the fore in the late 1950s when discussions began on the replacement of the "Queen Mary". The matter was one of great debate in the public arena and in government. The company still believed in an all-year express service between Southampton and New York and argued for a large ship designed primarily for the North Atlantic rather than for cruising: one capable of high speed even in the poor weather conditions in the winter. A dual-purpose ship was, for Cunard, an unsatisfactory compromise.[47] The Chandos commission was set up by government to investigate the market.[48] From Cabinet minutes[49], it's clear the government wanted to proceed cautiously; concerned that the shipping lobby would over influence any investigation. The days of ships being icons of national pride were passing along with their owners' influence over government. It was apparent that the market could no longer support the construction of a liner dedicated to the North Atlantic trade and the company, quoting the increasing tendency of first-class passengers to travel by air, cancelled the construction of the so-called Q3 liner.[50] The discussion over a future liner continued into the 1960s even though government saw air transport as the future[51] and was encouraging the setting up of a joint company by Cunard and

BOAC.[52] The company and the government finally agreed the terms of a loan[53] and in 1967 Cunard launched the Q4 (which became known as the "Queen Elizabeth 2"). This ship was more suited to cruising but capable of being used on the North Atlantic. It brought about, according to Dawson, "a shift from … an express vessel with hotel facilities added to that of a modern ocean-going urban resort with mobility and, when needed, North Atlantic, express speed".[54] The ship's interior design was also a matter of controversy, with an open debate over the need to show the very best that modern British design could offer. The external appearance was very distinctive and the accommodation substantially higher standard than any other British ship. Modern technology was at the fore, from the materials of construction through the power units to complex lighting systems designed to cope with the ship's dual role.

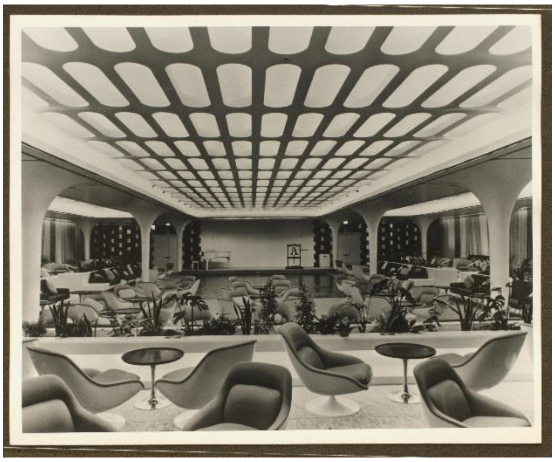

Fig 4 Queen's Room, "Queen Elizabeth 2"

Source: Cunard Archive, University of Liverpool, D42/PR18/1/9/3

Shipbuilding and Shipbuilding Record described the vessel as, "a ship with … a future" and "an outstanding example of the shipbuilders' art"[55] with, according to the *Architect's Journal,* "innumerable small advances add[ing] up to something significantly new".[56] However, as a sign of the changing times, Concorde flew on a test flight just before her maiden voyage. Within a year PanAm's Boeing 747 made its inaugural flight, heralding further expansion of air passenger numbers.

The Emerging Airline Industry

Before discussing the approach taken by the airlines, it is useful to consider the structure – the International Airline Industry Association – within which they operated. Perhaps most surprisingly this organisation, set up in 1945,[57] followed the model of the shipping conferences. Decisions needed to be unanimous and airlines had little room to decide for themselves on the class structures on planes[58] or the entertainment offered to passengers. Consequently, even in this expanding sector, change was relatively slow. Not until 1952 could Pan Am to get agreement on the introduction of a tourist class with significantly lower fares.[59] In 1964, there was still disagreement on the provision of in-flight entertainment. Air France considered the idea "stupid", one which would not entice a single passenger away from sea travel. Pan Am thought airlines should be carrying passengers and not moving into the entertainment business. Some of their competitors held views quite to the contrary.[60]

IATA took a rather benign view over the future of trans-Atlantic travel and the role played by sea and air in developing the market. “We do not”, said the Director General in 1948, “want to take traffic from [other modes], nor shall we so do”.[61] Ten years later, when the number of air passengers exceeded those travelling by sea, his successor still maintained that, “there is plenty of room for us all and alternative ways of crossing the ocean are good for the public and good for transporters”.[62]

Individual airlines were more competitive in their attitude to the shipping lines. By around 1950 Lockheed Constellations and the double-decked Boeing 377 Stratocruisers were replacing slower pre-war seaplanes. Trans-Atlantic flight times reduced to around eleven hours with one or two stops. Passengers, claimed the airlines, could “cross the ocean in comfort” not cooped up in a seat but, as a timetable illustration[63] showed, able to play a quiet game of cards or have a drink at the cocktail bar[64] – an image repeated in an image (Figure 5) from a Stratocruiser brochure.

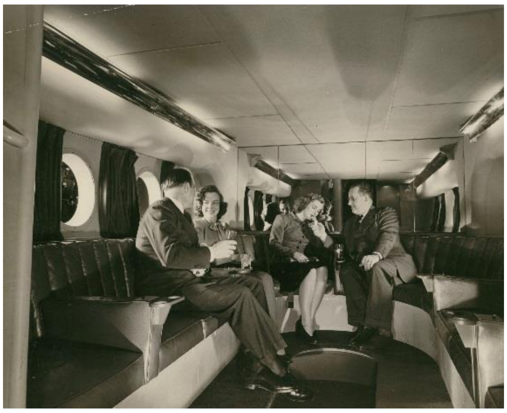

Figure 5 The lower deck lounge, Boeing Stratocruiser

Source: The Royal Aeronautical Society (National Aerospace Library) / Mary Evans Picture Library, Reference 10838763

Airlines continued to use many images – a man reading newspaper or a smiling child – to connote the comfort[65] of air travel. A Comet flight would be so smooth that a child could build a house of cards without risk of it collapsing.[66]

Just as shipping lines had, in the 1920s, set out to capture the emerging middle-class market[67] with brochures describing the journey experience,[68] so too were airlines in business to create a new market. An American Overseas Airlines (AA) 1949 brochure, “Let me tell you about our Flagship Trip to Europe”[69] was full of encouragement to realise long-held aspirations. Its cover introduced the potential passenger to two relaxed, returning passengers who share their experience: “We’ve done it … and are we glad! … Mary’s life-long travel dream, and mine, was just like yours – or anyone else’s …”. The readers were assured about the ease of the trip organisation: “Getting papers and documents was easy, just like any other crossing” – clearly targeting experienced sea travellers to try this alternative. Reassurance was given about flying itself – no sensation of height or speed and a noise level “about the same as … in your own car … at 45 mph”. AA promised a smooth flight: “In the winter when … the ocean … is roughest, the upper air … is as quiet and serene as at any time”. Besides this, continued the brochure, you won’t be bored, you can stroll, visit the library, write letters and of course there’s plenty to see outside and onboard. Like the shipping lines, airlines used food to frame the passenger’s experience.[70] So, claimed AA’s brochure the food is “cooked to sizzling perfection” and served “with linen and shell china”. In the same vein a BOAC poster showed food of excellent quality, beautifully presented and expertly served by attendants in immaculate white coats.[71] The almost explicit references to First Class ship cuisine must have had resonance for the experienced traveller. In another challenge to the ethos of the shipping industry and the complexity of on-board etiquette, BOAC made the simple statement on a poster, “No tips please”.[72] All these advertisements were carefully constructed to appeal, not just to new travellers, but also to those who had experienced the discomfort of a rough sea journey – no matter how luxurious the ship or well prepared the food.

As well as addressing the needs of potential holidaymakers, AA promoted itself to business with a brochure “Air travel cuts EXPENSES”.[73] Sea travel was not a time for reflection and planning. On ships, important employees were “simply an overhead cost” as they “[sat] in a transport”. Cost comparisons showed that even though air travel was more expensive, the total cost, with time taken into account, was lower. The “luxury [of air travel was] not an indulgence but an economy”. Whilst the sea-borne businessman was still travelling, the air traveller had completed business and taken a day’s relaxation as well.

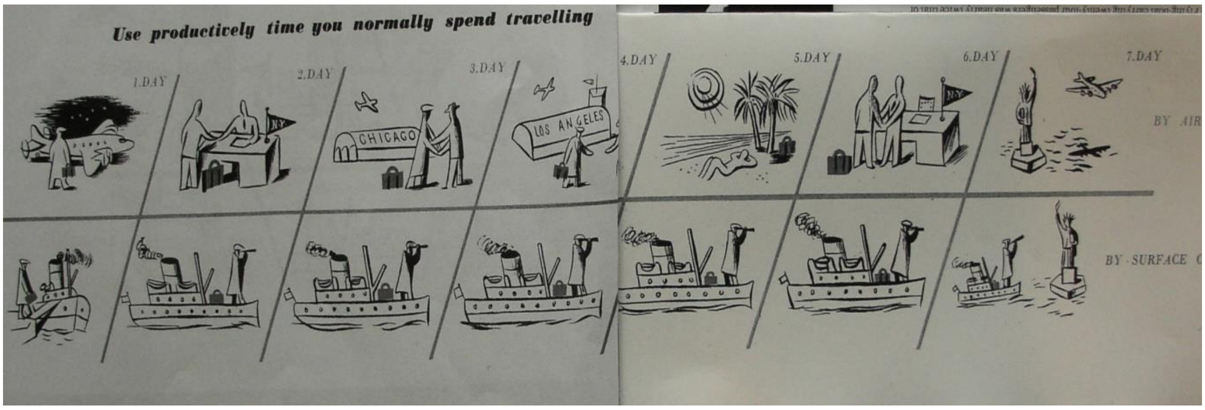

Figure 6 Air travel cuts Expenses, American Overseas Airlines Brochure, 1949

Source: Cunard Archive, University of Liverpool, D42/GM20/1/6/3

Votolato suggests that the airlines imported interior design from the ocean-going liners, hotels and Pullman carriages to counter the concerns of potential fliers and to “demonstrate that, although in an unfamiliar environment, they were … with their own kind”.[74] Whilst this is true, airline marketeers went further, I suggest, telling the would-be passenger they could have the benefits of luxury sea travel without the discomforts of storms and consequent delays.

Unlike the shipping lines, AA did not shrink from direct comparisons, describing their "luxurious STRATOCRUISERS" (their capitals) as the "undisputed "Queens" of the air". The smooth winter flying conditions and a daily noon departure from London promised that "no other form of transport can offer comparable advantages".[75] So concerned was Cunard in the USA about the airlines' attitude that they wrote in advance of a meeting between The Atlantic Conference (the shipping lines) and IATA (the airlines) to express their concern over "the direct attempt to undermine travel by sea in endeavouring to promote air business".[76] The meeting's agenda included an item on these "invidious comparisons" with the comment, "It is the practice of the Steamship Lines to refrain from … unfavourable comparisons [and] we recommend to IATA the adoption of a similar policy by Air Lines".[77] In spite of this, airlines' advertising continued to set potential passenger's minds at rest and to lay before them the possibilities offered by this new mode of transport. By presenting themselves in this way the airlines could claim to be keeping to their own advertising standards which outlawed "statements derogatory to the … service of competitors",[78] but, unlike the shipping lines rules, did not ban comparisons.

Two further events would firmly place air transport at the heart of transatlantic travel. The first, in the early 1950s, was the introduction of tourist fares.[79] This opened up "an enormous, practically unlimited market"[80] as tourist ambitions widened. People wanted to spend as much time at their destination as possible.[81] The second event was the regular use of larger, faster jet-engined planes in the late 1950s by BOAC and Pan American.[82] The reduced the journey time, enabled PanAm to claim "You can meet in London tonight" (their underlining).[83]

Hudson and Pettifer have suggested the airlines succeeded by offering equivalent attractions to the shipping companies.[84] Rather, I suggest, they persuaded people this was a more effective way to meet their overall travel ambitions.

Responding to the challenge

It would be wrong to imagine that the company ignored the developing air travel industry. As early as 1937 the US Maritime Commission suggested that in the future the costs of the one-day journey by flying boat would become comparable with the price of travelling by express liner. The consequences of this could be far reaching. In 1942, aware of this document, Sir Percy Bates (the chairman) wrote, "Such a faster service, with ample capacity for a large part of the passenger … traffic would cause the super-liner service to lose much of its appeal".[85] Under his leadership the company prepared for the arrival of the airlines after WWII. Even before this, from 1934 onwards,[86] the company held discussions with Imperial Airways and others. In 1937 a share in Imperial Airways was declined because of other needs in the business for the money. Throughout the war the Company discussed with the government and BOAC various forms of involvement. In 1945 the shipping companies were offered 25% in the newly formed BOAC. Cunard White Star considered taking between 5% and 7.5% but all came to nought when the government decided the airline would operate as a public service and not open to private shareholding. Internally the board struggled to assess the nature of any threat[87] with a range of views on the depth and speed of any impact on the business. A year earlier Bates had proposed that the company engaged with the airline business but not in its own name. Both he and fellow director, Lord Brocklebank, foresaw this engagement in the form of co-operation rather than competition. This view continued to be held long after Bates' death in 1946. Eleven years later the company stated[88]

> Many say air and sea are in competition… [however the] route between America and Europe [is] different… [it is] comparatively short – a long weekend by express ships, by air 6½ hours, shortly to be 3½…. So long as sea travel provides "the holiday at sea" … in comparison to the "34-inch seat" by air [the company] expects [the complementary rather than competitive options] to persist.

Even in 1963 the following view still pertained[89]

> … [the] 'sea-versus-air battle for passengers on the North Atlantic has now stabilised itself…. [there has been a] 10% [increase] in the Queens [compared to] last year's figures … . There is an ever growing appreciation of the relaxation of a sea voyage. In fact, many travellers continue to prefer the amenities offered during a sea voyage, notwithstanding the tendency to reduce air-fares'.

A marketing survey carried out in 1965[90] supported this view, seeing a continued future for combination trips with even more focus on the voyage as holiday. For business travel, the agency saw value in promoting the therapeutic value as a counter to "… the increasingly recognised phenomenon of "time zone fatigue"". The report was critical of the relationships between shipping lines and travel agents and saw this as something, together with advertising spending, needing attention. However, beyond that, the report painted a brighter future than might have been expected.

To most potential passengers Cunard could distinguish itself from the airlines in only two ways: by its long safety record and by making something positive of the time aboard. As far as I can tell it did nothing about the former, presumably because it felt unable to label flight as unsafe even though there were periods (e.g. in the early 1950s when the Comet design faults were discovered) when some may have been deterred from flying. On the latter, it focussed on promoting the voyage as time well spent, whether that be by the leisure passenger or the businessman. Cunard did this for the holidaymaker by positioning the journey as part of the holiday rather than a precursor. "Getting there is half the fun" was launched in the early 1950s with an emphasis the on-board facilities and entertainment.

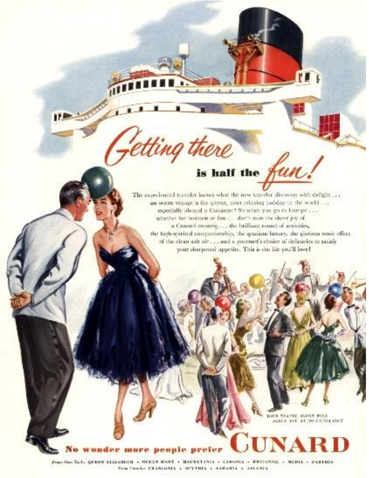
Getting there is half the fun!
No wonder more people prefer CUNARD

Figure 7 Getting there is half the fun!

Source: The Advertising Archives, London, ref 30548917

A series of advertisements set out to show, in the words of one, the “crossing … [as] a healthful, completely relaxing vacation in itself. Joyful hours filled with gaiety, sparkling companionship, smiling thoughtful service and luscious international delicacies”.[91] Further, the ship itself was presented as a holiday destination. For example, one advertisement shows the “Queen Elizabeth” viewed from a high angle, sailing on a calm blue sea into the sun; on the decks, relaxed passengers whiling away their time at sea without any concerns. Brochures, advertisements and promotional films (including one with commentary by Alistair Cooke, the well-known BBC correspondent based in New York[92]) set out to emphasise the nature of life aboard ship, a place where the passenger would find “a … sense of wellbeing … created by … thoughtful service”, “comfortable facilities … for viewing films”, and “the chance to work up an appetite with a game of … deck tennis out in the sparkling sea air”[93].

During the 1950s First Class travel was particularly promoted as leisure (which could be combined with business if that was the reason for the crossing) through the “Travel the Big Way” advertisements and a booklet[94] for both business and pleasure travel. Throughout this period the focus was on the quality of the experience. Travel with Cunard implied a particular lifestyle, one most desirable for those accustomed to elegance and sophistication. Its “Gracious Living” Campaign, reminded passengers they had “all the time [for] a complete break from the rush and worry of everyday life”.[95] Advertisements featured tables laden with exquisite food (rationing persisted in the UK until 1954) prepared by a white-hatted chef and served by an immaculately dressed maître d’. The journey was not “[just] a means to an end”, instead it was a “well deserved break” with “benefits that are *beyond* (Cunard’s italics) price” ensuring the traveller would “go ashore invigorated and refreshed”. There was, Cunard suggested “no better way” to cross the Atlantic.

For the business passenger, the company suggested the time aboard should be seen as a benefit, providing days for uninterrupted thought and work in surroundings most conducive to these activities. In 1951 Cunard introduced a seagoing secretarial service on board the two “Queens”.[96]

"Travel in its Finest Sense"[97] promised to take "the strain out of business travel".[98] Each ship carried eight "lady assistant pursers" to take notes and type for passengers.[99] "Stenographers" and Dictaphones were available on all but two ships before the end of the 1950s.[100] At sea, said Cunard in the leaflet "On board secretarial service",[101] "the frantic tempo of the modern office is forgotten. Quiet concentration is easily attained … Business becomes a pleasure". Once aboard ship, implied Cunard, the businessman was in control. He was away from the rush of office life but could still be in daily touch by use of the radio telephone. "Nowhere", wrote the editor of the *Cunard Times* in 1952,[102] "[is] better for quiet, concentrated thought on some knotty business problem than a comfortable armchair in a shipboard smoking room … Nowhere better for working out a plan of campaign for the important meetings … that will begin soon after the ship ties up at New York or Southampton". Evidence to support his view came, he thought, from the on-board planning, thirty years previously, of the amalgamation to form ICI. Perhaps a more recent example would have strengthened his case. Ironically, the output from this service had to be airmailed on arrival either in letter form or as tape;[103] anything faster would have to await the wider use of radio fax communication. To support its position Cunard highlighted the medical view of business travel – at least one crossing should be by ship. In 1959 the chairman of Cunard wrote,[104] "if medical opinion is correct there is a danger that air speed has out-stepped the capacity of man to adapt and he needs at least to go one way by sea to give himself time to recuperate". To link this medical view more directly to business the company obtained the views of J. J. O'Dwyer, Principal Medical Advisor to the multinational Unilever, who opined that too rapid changes in climate and environment were hazardous to health.[105] Further, recommended the doctor, it was beneficial for wives to accompany their spouses. Overall, concluded the writer, "[There] is no need to re-emphasise the importance of sound health and mental alertness for those whose work is strenuous … no doubt that sea travel is an excellent tonic".

Cunard, despite the mounting evidence around it, believed it could maintain a presence in business travel. True to a tradition of seeking to manage the physical and temporal space of the ship its basic position remained unchanged for over thirty years. Although it did update and promote the services it provided, it continued to market the crossing on the broadly the same basis of rest from day to day business pressures.

Even as late as the 1960s Cunard could still find businessmen who favoured sea travel[106] but the balance of travel had shifted inexorably in favour of the airlines in no small part because service was improving and flight times reducing (down to less than ten hours non-stop London to New York by a Boeing 707 in 1960).[107] At this time the company did invest directly in air passenger services. Cunard Eagle was set up to provide a scheduled service between London and New York. BOAC objected and their appeal to the Minister of Aviation was successful[108] and the service closed. In 1962 Cunard's interest in flights to New York were revived through a joint venture with BOAC. In a hark-back to

Bates' board paper of 1944, the companies promised to "work in the closest cooperation … sell[ing] each other's services … in a coordinated service to the international travelling public"[109] as part of a fly one way/take the ship one way strategy.[110]

It is easy to apply the wisdom of hindsight. It was difficult for Cunard in the early 1950s to judge the extent to which the airlines would bite into their trade. Total passenger numbers were increasing (see table 1), from just over a million in 1950 to over two and a half million ten years later. Whilst ship passenger numbers were still 25% higher by the end of the decade, air passengers increased by a factor of six. In spite of overall growth, by that time the direction of the shipping line's share was becoming evident.

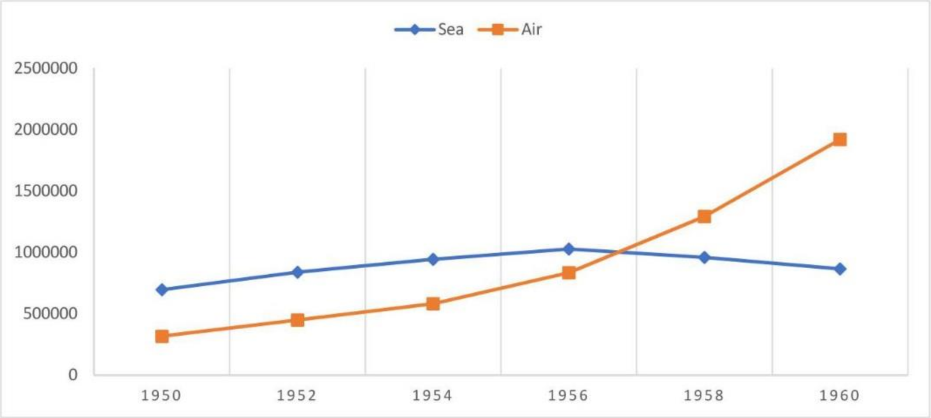

Figure 8 Total numbers of passengers crossing the Atlantic

Source: Cunard Archive, University of Liverpool, Passenger numbers, D42/PR4/46/25

Changes in fares only reinforced the shift. By 1964 airline fares, indexed against 1946 as 100, had dropped to 57 whilst Cunard fares (on the Queens) approximately doubled in both First Class and Tourist.[111] The government pre-empted any attempt to narrow the difference through subsidy. The Minister of Transport wrote of it as "wasting taxpayer's money on an old fashioned type of service in a futile subsidy race".[112] The overall market continued grow but within the next few years whilst airline passenger numbers increased (to over three million by 1964), those travelling by ship declined further.[113]

Conclusions

Could it have been different for Cunard? Based on the evidence I have found, probably not. The company did set up Cunard Eagle and, said the chairman, "we plan to introduce jet travel at Cunard styles of comfort … we will aim at luxury travel … we will not be in severe competition with BOAC".[114] It was as if the company, from within its traditions and culture, considered there to be a segment of the market for which it could set the standard and the rules. Just as it believed there could be an expanding, mutually beneficial, non-competitive market for both ship and plane on the North Atlantic,[115] so there was a segment of the premium air market uniquely suited to the Cunard ethos. In the end, BOAC challenged Cunard's transatlantic licence and the aspiration of independent, direct Cunard flights across the ocean came to nothing. Had the service survived its impact was questionable. The *Journal of Commerce and Shipping Telegraph* thought Cunard would not have brought extra traffic nor made a difference to fares or standards.[116]

The company did much to give added value to the time at sea both for the holiday maker and for the business man but no matter what they did, nothing could avoid the simple fact that the shorter crossing time by air put decision making into the hands of the passenger. He or she could decide whether to reduce their total time away or spend more time at their destination relaxing or preparing for their business.

Finally, in late 1960s the company recognised their market had changed forever when the chairman concluded, "people who need transport will use the air ... ships are for leisure".[117]

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