

THE RETURN OF THE BLUE ENSIGN

AN INTERVIEW WITH CAPTAIN CHRISTOPHER WELLS

By Richard H. Wagner

Those familiar with *Queen Mary 2* and Cunard ships in general know that they usually fly the red ensign of the British merchant marine. However, this year, the prestigious blue ensign signifying that the master of the ship holds a commission in the Royal Naval Reserve has once again been seen over *Queen Mary 2*. It marks the return to Cunard of Captain Christopher Wells, a bright, articulate officer with diverse sea experience, including senior officer positions on *Queen Elizabeth 2*, being involved with the construction of *QM2*, and commanding P&O Cruises' *Oriana* and *Oceana* as well as time with the Royal Naval Reserve and on cargo ships. I sat down with him on *QM2* to talk about his career, the recent history of Cunard and Cunard today.

Tankers and Ferries

Born in Bournemouth, England, Captain Wells decided to go to sea after completing his A level examinations. "In the early '70s the great training companies were tanker companies. The cargo companies still existed and were training but the passenger ships were not. The passenger ships always knew that the wider merchant navy could supply them with pre-trained officers -- once they got their master's ticket, people would be prepared to come to the passenger ships and it was always fairly traditional, certainly in the '60s and the '70s, that people would do their training on the cargo ships and then go somewhere else. I answered an advertisement in the newspapers about a cadetship with Shell and found myself in quite rapid time [attending the Warsash School of

Navigation at the University of Southampton]. I actually did 16 years with Shell, which is quite a long time -- a four year apprenticeship and another 12 years where I was third officer, second officer, and chief officer. In the final six years, almost always with the gas carriers out in the far east running liquefied natural gas up to Japan."

While Wells learned seamanship on the tankers, the lifestyle was much different than what he would later experience on passenger ships. "I was always a watch keeper, so you become almost a recluse. You hand over to the third mate who is on watch after you and you take over from the second mate who is on watch before you and you don't see anybody else for maybe four months. You lose all of the art of conversation." In addition, as time passed, changes in the industry were resulting in longer and longer tours of duty. "Instead of serving for four months, it became five months and they were so short of people, it became six months and seven months, and it was too long to do that."

Consequently, Wells decided to take a break from tankers and return home to England. Through a close friend, he obtained a job driving high speed ferries from Poole, where he had grown up, to Southampton. Nine months later, the ferry company went bankrupt. However, an opening arose at P&O Ferries for an officer for its cross-Channel ferries. "The agency that was organizing my ferry interviews said: 'Cunard is looking for a second officer for the *QE2*. Unfortunately, you are too qualified, so they won't want to interview you -- you have a master's certificate and they only need a mate's certificate. But, they want to

interview five people, we have only got two people to offer them."

Wells responded: "You organize me an interview with P&O on Friday, I'll go along to Cunard to make the numbers up on Wednesday.' So, I went off and had an interview with the Staff Captain of the *QE2* in Cunard's office in Southampton on Wednesday and I started with them on the Friday."

With Cunard in the 1990s

Wells started on Cunard's then-flagship, the *QE2*, in 1992 as second officer. However, he did not stay second officer long. Because he had a master's certificate, Wells was quickly promoted to senior officer of the watch. Then, in rapid succession, he became chief officer and then staff captain. Along the way, he served not only on *QE2* but on *Cunard Countess* and *Royal Viking Sun* (now Holland America's *Prinsendam*).

Cunard had been in the passenger ship business for nearly a century and a half but in the 1990s it was struggling to find its direction. The traditional passenger business had vanished with the coming of the commercial jet airplane. A new cruise industry was emerging. Just where Cunard fit in was not at all clear. "In those days, we had very different flavors on each ship. The *Countess* and the [*Cunard*] *Princess* were happy holiday ships, serving the fly-cruise market out from the UK, all British passengers. The *QE2* was the *QE2*. If you wanted to say what brand was it, it was its own brand. The *Royal Viking Sun* was still marketed when I went on there as Royal Viking. It was owned by Cunard but it wasn't a Cunard brand, it was the Royal Viking brand. It was quite peculiar. *Vistafjord* and *Sagafford* were Cunard ships with Cunard written big on the sides but with very Norwegian or Scandinavian atmospheres within them. They were originally Norwegian America Line. They still had Norwegian America Line crockery and labels around the ships but they came in a brochure with Cunard written on the front. And we had *Sea Goddess I* and *Sea Goddess II*, who were the Sea Goddess ships. So, in those days, in the middle 90s, there was no combined or common Cunard brand."

"We went through different management every year. Our president used to leave and we would have a new president. 'What are we going to do?' 'We are going to change everything!' 'We are going to be all Cunard' or 'we are going to be an all luxury brand.' A fellow came in at one stage who had previously been managing director of Rolls Royce and said: 'Right, we are going to be luxury only' and the lower grade cabins



Captain Christopher Wells.

on *QE2* were shut down and the Mauretania restaurant, which was the dual seating restaurant, became single seating. We dropped from 1900 passengers to 1600 passengers and we were the luxury *QE2* brand. A year later, he disappeared and we had somebody else come in and it was 'No, no, no. We are going to maximize revenue and we are going to fill the ship up to the brim. Put all of those cabins back into service, make the Mauretania two seatings again.' So, we had lots of different changes. At the same time, Trafalgar House was being swallowed up by Kvaerner and Kvaerner did not want to own ships, it wanted to be an industrial company and Cunard as a whole was put up for sale."

Cunard Reborn

Kvaerner did not find a ready buyer for Cunard or its polyglot of aging ships of various sizes and styles. The most likely buyer, P&O Princess, then the third largest company in the cruise business, reportedly said that it was not interested. By 1997, things looked bleak for Cunard.

"And that was when Mr. [Micky] Arison [of Carnival Corporation] decided that Cunard as a brand

was something that he would like to own. He saved the company, he saved the line, he saved *QE2* by buying [Cunard]. Then, there was some re-branding and there was a re-distribution of the ships [between Cunard and Carnival subsidiary Seabourn Cruises]. The Sea Goddesses became Seabourn Goddesses. The *Royal Viking Sun* became the *Seabourn Sun*. The *Vistafjord* became the new *Caronia*. *QE2* was still *QE2*. But now we had Cunard Line with *QE2* and *Caronia* and Seabourn Line had all the others. What was a good thing was deciding what we were. We became the liners and concentrated on the liners."

In addition, Carnival Corporation decided to build a new ocean liner for Cunard. Wells leaves no doubt that one man was behind this plan, Carnival Corporation CEO Micky Arison. "He personally drove the project to deliver this ship. It was his vision to have the most magnificent transatlantic liner ever built. He was involved from the very start. He said: 'I have bought the company to maintain the tradition.' He had come to America with his father on a Cunard liner in 1955 or whenever it was and he wanted to maintain that tradition. He was involved straight away with Stephen Paine on the design of the ship. It was he who made the decision to commit the money for the ship and he came to the shipyard every two or three months throughout the construction to have a look to see how it was going and, with his eye to detail, say: 'I don't like this, change this and adjust that.' He was here for the delivery. He was here at the beginning and, yes, he took a personal interest in this ship. This is Mr. Arison's baby."

Although Carnival had the largest fleet of passenger ships in the world and built ships regularly, it wanted to have the expertise of people who had actually sailed an ocean liner during the building of what was to become the *Queen Mary 2*. So, Wells left his position as Staff Captain of *QE2* in April 2002 and took up residence in St. Nazaire, France where the new ship was being built. "I was seconded to the Carnival Corporate ship building team. There were three of us there to start with, myself, the chief electrical officer and the chief engineer, and our primary role was to monitor the contract. We were given a copy of the contract. 'This is what we had contracted to buy. You look at what is being built and make sure what is being built is what we have contracted for.' Whenever we were doing an inspection, we were making sure that what was being delivered complied with the contract."

"So, I was doing ship inspections, steel inspections and equipment inspections for deck related equipment before it was delivered - - safety equipment, anchors, windlasses, winches, steering gear. Going out

to the factories where things were being finally tested before they were being delivered to the yard for putting on the ship."

In addition, Wells was involved in developing the computerized safety systems for the ship. If one of the sensors detected a fire or safety problem on the ship, the computers had to know what to do in response. For example, should the system "stop ventilation or maintain extract on ventilation and stop supply, shut fire doors, start a smoke extraction system. . . . I was involved in deciding for each space on the ship what pre-planned action should be programmed into the system. I was working very closely with safety designers on how the safety system would work. It was fascinating, very, very interesting. Just the whole thing, a very, very interesting 18 months."

"I remember the last month prior to delivery, all the new ship's company coming in. We were all in three big holiday-like camps around St Nazaire, being shipped into the yard every day. A huge amount of training and introducing them to the ship was going on. Also, everything portable had to be carried into the ship and it was the ship's company that did it. So, we had this huge team building exercise almost by chance. And as we delivered the ship, the ship's company just melded together - - huge pride in bringing this ship out. What makes the ship's company here at the moment so good is the pride that they have in this ship and the fact that they are working on this very, very special ship. It is astounding. I am quite sure that many of the comments that we get complimenting the ship's staff on their attitude, their attentiveness, their service, [stems from] the pride that they have in the product."

Princess and P&O

Meanwhile, another major change was taking place in the industry. Royal Caribbean, the number two player in the cruise industry, announced plans to merge with P&O Princess. Carnival Corporation made a pre-emptive offer and won. "I don't think when Carnival bought Cunard, the plan was to buy P&O Princess. They were quite a large competitor and I think buying Cunard was buying something to compete in the UK market. P&O was a huge company but it got broken up into little bits - - ferries over there, cruise ships over here, and port infrastructure over here. As soon as the cruise ship thing was set up as a separate entity, it became liable for a bid."

The acquisition of P&O Princess resulted in a number of changes for Cunard. One of these was that opportunities for Cunard officers emerged in the new sister companies' fleets. Thus, after 18 months as Staff

Captain of *Queen Mary 2*, Wells was offered a post at Princess. "I went from here [QM2], which was a very new modern ship, to Princess' newest ship, the *Caribbean Princess*, their largest ship at that time. I had one contract there and then I went over to P&O onto smaller ships so I was able to be promoted, which was great."

"The [Princess] product itself is different - - much less contact between ship's officers and the passengers. No hosted tables. Cocktail parties, yes, but there wasn't the close relationship between the passengers and the ship's officers that there are within Cunard and within P&O. P&O and Cunard are very similar products. I think the British market expects that close presence of the ship's officers around the ship to be seen and to be spoken to."

"It was funny that my first command was *Oriana*. When I was on *QE2* and *Oriana* was brand new, we were in together in Bali on her maiden world cruise. I stood with her Staff Captain, Bill Kent, on the quay when I was Staff Captain on *QE2*. I had known Bill for a long time as a Royal Naval Reserve officer and we had a very pleasant day standing on the quay running the launch tender operation. And we weren't of course jealous that they had a shiny new ship. We didn't have any new ships and we did not have any on the horizon. We agreed to differ on the benefits of having a new ship. Yet, ten years later, there it was my first command."

"She is 70,000 tons and a very nice ship. The funnel is set well aft, a buff color funnel. She was the first of their new ships. A German built ship - - Pappenberg, Meyer Werft. Very traditional inside. I think a lot of the history from Canberra had been absorbed when they were building their new ship. There were lots of small public rooms rather than great big public areas. Perhaps that is also why I felt at home there - - that she is quite traditional inside and I was used to *QE2* over many years."

Style of command

This year, Captain Wells is dividing his time between *Queen Mary 2* and P&O's *Oceana*. "Commodore Bernard Warner is the regular captain for [Queen Mary 2]. I am mindful of the fact that this ship is Commodore Warner's ship so I am not trying to make huge changes in the way that things are



Captain Wells brings QM2 into the Queen Elizabeth II Passenger Terminal in Southampton

done everyday."

One of the reasons that officers are now able to shift between ships of different companies is that the ships have a common rule book. "The way the ships are managed is very much through our rules and regulations which are in a thing called 'Fleet Regulations.' Those fleet regulations are common across the five different brands, Cunard, P&O, Princess, Ocean Village and P&O Australia, which are all linked within the Carnival Corporation. So, [an officer] can go to any one of those five brands and the same fleet regulations apply to all of those ships. You have to know the type of ship but I was here [QM2] for her first 18 months of service so I knew the ship already."

Within the governing regulations, captains have their own style of command. "My style is considerably less formal than the first commodore, Commodore [Ronald] Warwick, who had perhaps a more traditional formal style. That is not to say that the requirements are not still there. What we have to achieve is still there, maybe the style with which we achieve it [is different]."

Less formality in the command structure reflects the fact that a rigid military-style command structure is somewhat at odds with the increasing emphasis on service in the passenger ship industry. "We are not a military organization and I have a little experience from the military side of things. I am a reserve officer, I go off with the Royal Navy for a fortnight every year and there the command structure is very formal and it is very hierarchical. The idea here on a passenger ship is that we need to concentrate on guests

first. The be all and end all is that you will put the customer at the center of everything that you do. You put the customer first and then everything faces the customer. That is something which I think is very valid."

"At the end of the day, we are all here, whether I am driving the ship, whether I am maintaining the engines, whether I am frying steaks in the galley, we are all here to provide a holiday experience. We are all here to make sure that all passengers, our guests, have a wonderful holiday. That is the be all and end all. When I do my introduction to the new ship's company - - I always see all the new ship's company, I do an induction presentation talk - - that is what I tell them, that is what we are here for. Our guests are here on their holidays, we are to give them a good holiday. That is the first thing and everything else comes after."

"We have a White Star training group so we try and bring people in and give them pure service training for about two weeks before they actually take over a role. That is all to do with giving them an orientation to the ship but even more importantly an orientation to this service ethic that we expect on this ship - - the White Star service that we are so proud of."

The Retirement of QE2

In November, *QE2* will be leaving the Cunard fleet to become a hotel at Dubai World in the United Arab Emirates. "I spent 12 years of my life on that ship. I met my wife on the ship. I came to passenger ships through that ship. I have watched it since I was a small boy when it was being delivered in '67 and I was 9 years old. When I was a small child, I had an Airfix model of the ship. There is a lot of history. My son when he was one, took his first steps unaided on the helicopter deck of that ship. So, there are all those memories that go with it. Obviously, I am sad to see it go from service."

The primary reason for *QE2's* retirement is not any technological problem with the hull or the engines, or the need to comply with the new safety at sea regulations that come into effect in 2010. Rather, the problem flows from the need to attract passengers beyond those who are ship lovers in order to keep her viable. "She cannot compete in style with the modern arrangements on modern cruise ships or liners. The cabins, although they were magnificent cabins for 1967 when they were built, are different sizes, they are different shapes. She is very dark inside, portholes as opposed to windows. People expect more. People's expectations are more now, far higher than they were in the 1960s. It is a different generation. So, she cannot compete. As much as I love her, I think it is right to allow her to retire grace-

fully."

"We will try and absorb as many of the ship's company of *QE2* into the remaining two Cunard ships as we can without throwing the existing ships companies from *Queen Mary 2* and *Queen Victoria* out. And of course, we have the bigger empire, the P&O ships, the Ocean Village ships, the Princess ships, to spread as many of our team through as possible because we need to hang on to our team. We have an 18 month gap before [Cunard's new ship] *Queen Elizabeth* comes out. We are going to have to man *Queen Elizabeth* in 18 months. We don't want to lose all that experience but it will be a challenge."



Captain Wells has a warrant to fly the prestigious blue ensign signifying that the master of the vessel also serves in the Royal Naval Reserve.