

A Moment in Time – Series # 1

Andrew Weir's iconic "Bank Line Ltd"



Submitted by

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Bank Line was one of several remarkable British shipping companies that served the wide world for over 100 years, first with a large fleet of sailing vessels and then into the twentieth century with steam and motor ships. In good trading years the fleet totaled around 45/50 vessels at any one time, a number which enabled the company to meet any sudden cargo call from almost any location. However, after the beginning of the 'container revolution' in the early 1970s a steady decline occurred. This was triggered by many available cargoes moving into containers, and by shippers adopting new patterns evolving into today's 'Hub and feeder' system whereby cargo is channeled into more, or less, rigid routings. Some companies faced with declining trade chose to amalgamate into consortia with a connected risk of losing their identity, but the board of the Bank Line attempted to struggle on with diminishing volumes and at the same time to accommodate those shippers who wanted containers. It was a familiar reaction and one which was taken up by many companies. They all failed eventually. Bank Line was particularly unsuited to part container trades having built up lucrative Pacific Island round trip voyages with manufactured goods outward from the USA Gulf ports, and bulk cargoes, notably Copra and coconut oil homewards. The attempt to provide the trade with part container ships and to partner with Shaw Savill in the '80s failed to work in the long run, and this failure was aggravated by the USA shippers preferring the 40ft container more or less from the outset. Deadheading containers back to the USA was also a loss-maker. A struggle set in, and new tonnage, bigger and faster joined the fleet and with a greater container capacity, but it was not to be. The new ships were then sold off quickly as it was realized that they were unprofitable. The demise of the company occurred finally in 2005.

The founder and owner of the company, Andrew Weir, later **Lord Inverforth**, shared the distinction of being one of a select band of ship owning entrepreneurs whose names were household words, certainly in the huge shipping industry that existed under the British flag. As a young man, Andrew Weir took his first step by purchasing a small sailing vessel called the **Willowbank** back in 1885. It was a gamble, given the risks and vulnerability of single vessel ownership at that time, but fortunately, it paid off and he quickly added both new and second-hand vessels to the fleet.



One of Andrew Weir's sailing ships the **Gowanbank** and the **1924** built Steamer **Comliebank**

His acumen with finance was amply demonstrated by confident expansion and the fleet of sailing vessels soon became the largest under the British flag, a feat which was unlikely ever to be exceeded. There were regular losses, a tragedy both for the owner and the families of the crews who often never achieved closure for the loss of their loved ones who had met a watery grave somewhere out on the oceans. Losses of 50% or more were normal in the sailing ship era due to the natural hazards of the wind and waves plus the risk of fire and stranding. New buildings came regularly from Scottish yards, notably Hall Russell in Glasgow and when steamers were preferred in the early years of the 20th Century it was the same yard that received the orders.

In 1905 the company name was changed to the 'Bank Line' and offices were set up in London. A taste for twin-screw steamers lasted for some years and despite the extra cost and workload associated with two sets of engines and spares the ships often exceeded 35 years of service circling the globe endlessly. They were definitely 'workhorses' of the oceans and could be seen in all the ports, often in remote areas. Andrew Weir was a bold and surefooted owner and in the years before WW2 full employment and profitable voyages were the norm. A record order for 18 twin-screw ships was placed in 1924, with the Govan yard of Harland and Wolff Ltd.

The men who manned these ships spent 2 years away and sometimes more. This was despite the primitive living and isolation that shipboard life demanded. Until new vessels arrived after WW2 life onboard meant living with the lack of any air conditioning and by the need for freshwater to be hand-pumped each day, usually a job for the apprentices. Steam winches, reliable but noisy were a feature. In tropical backwaters in port, the heat and humidity in the cabins were unrelenting and only helped in a breeze underway by a metal scoop stuck out of a porthole. The ships themselves were well maintained and sported wood sheathed decks and open handrails.

WW2 saw many casualties in the fleet, an experience shared by all of the British companies, and with a reduced fleet at the end of the war, Bank Line purchased 12 USA built Liberty ships from the Ministry of War Transport to bolster the fleet. It was the highest number taken by a single British owner and they served the company well with their economical running and simple but sturdy construction and engine. There were Fort vessels that also helped, although some were coal burning. A long term commitment for Phosphate rock from the Pacific islands of Nauru, Ocean Island, and Makatea was particularly suited to the Liberty ships which landed it in Australian and New Zealand ports for soil dressing, and signing on one of these vessels meant a fair chance of completing the monotonous Phosphate run during the time away from home.

Post WW2, the Bank Line embarked on a massive new building program and one which only peaked in the 1970s. Looking back some 50 years later, it seems even more remarkable that all those vessels all came from British yards, namely, Harland and Wolf in Belfast, William Doxford in Sunderland, and Messrs. Swan Hunter on Tyneside. Those were the days of British shipping successes. In 10 years, from 1957 to 1967, no less than 50 new vessels were launched for the Bank Line, often without much of a ceremony, and it is a tribute to the Owners, managers, and staff that these vessels could be absorbed so readily and gainfully into the worldwide fleet. It was a

staggering achievement by the yards and included a steady improvement in design and features as the years passed. By contrast, it seems almost bizarre that today, not only the building yards, but the Merchant Navy itself has shrunk beyond any significant presence.

Within the fleet in these heady years of expansion, a competent deck officer could look forward to an early command, after just a few voyages in the Chief Officer position, and barely 30 years old. There was also a good chance in the first few years of command of being asked to take out a brand-new vessel from the building yard, something rather special in a normal career. It was a great attraction and helped to retain Officers in a company where signing on for 2 years was still the rule. After all, wives and girlfriends ashore were always competing for loyalty and affection!

These fast arriving new vessels bolstered the fleet in the 1960s, and for many years, the total number of ships employed at any one time was maintained at around the 50 ships mark. There were losses however, some occasioned by the unique Pacific Island-hopping nature of the Bank Line trades. Post-war the Liberty **Kelvinbank** stranded on Ocean island, and the Southbank, and **Lindenbank** succumbed to the trickery of the Line Islands, 800 miles south of Hawaii. Also, in the Pacific but on the Peruvian Coast, the **Leverbank** stranded, and the **Trentbank** was lost in a collision. A couple of vessels that stranded in the Pacific escaped the coral clutches, the **Maplebank** in Fiji, and the **Beaverbank** again at Fanning Island. An older vessel, the **Westbank** grounded on another island, Juan De Nova in the Mozambique channel, but was also dragged off successfully.

The last 'Liberty' type vessel finally left the fleet in 1960, and the new modern fleet allowed for a vessel to be on call pretty much anywhere around the world at short notice, a unique feature which was a specialty of the Bank Line service, and it paid handsome dividends.

The big building programs of the '60s and 70's gradually slowed and in 1979 a new class of vessels called the 'Fish class' were ordered and built by Sunderland Shipbuilders. Named after freshwater fish the first to enter service was the **Roachbank** followed by 5 sisters. They were bigger and faster and had a container capacity for 372 containers but were sold off after a few years due to deteriorating trading conditions. The fleet continued into the '80s and '90s, albeit with a reduced number of vessels, some of the purchases bearing little resemblance to earlier deliveries, and several events marked the decline and eventual demise of this once iconic company.

Important changes at the helm also occurred resulting from the death of **Lord Inverforth** in 1955, and his son later in 1975. Tragedy then struck when the grandson, Roy Weir had an early death on his 50th birthday in 1982. An appetite for the shipping business then waned markedly, and other interests and acquisitions took an increasing amount of time.

Looking back from the vantage point of the 21st century, it is apparent what a great success the Bank Line was for over 100 years. The almost unique web of Liner services supplemented by charters on the tramp market provided a comprehensive worldwide network of ships. The fleet progression from sail to steam and motor also included several of the most prolific building programs in recent British shipping, and the Bank Line name is now an established part of maritime history.



MV. Laganbank of 1950s – mainly engaged on the Pacific Island Copra trade



Beautiful profile of the 1964 built **Irisbank**

End

For more on the Bank Line's history, articles and nostalgia, a visit to the dedicated web site "Bank Line on Line" is highly recommended (<https://banklineonline.com>). It is an excellent site administered by A. Rawlinson and dedicated exclusively to all things associated with the iconic Andrew Weir's Bank Line.

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