

Shipping Company

Brief History



Asiatic Steam Navigation Company

Operator of cargo liner services in and around the Bay of Bengal, based in Calcutta



Pre-P&O Years

Asiatic Steam Navigation Company was formed in 1878, under the auspices of the Liverpool merchant house Turner & Co and their Calcutta associates Turner Morrison & Company, to develop 'steam communication' in the Bay of Bengal. The new company received the active support of both Thomas H. Ismay and William Imrie of White Star Line. Asiatic's ships were cross traders serving the coastal trade between Calcutta and Bombay, between Calcutta, Chittagong, Rangoon and Moulmein; and later between Calcutta and Java via Malayan ports. Asiatic also acquired the Indian Government mail contract between Calcutta and the Andaman Islands, which included responsibility for the transport of convicts to penal colony at Port Blair.

Asiatic and the British India Steam Navigation Company were in direct competition on a number of routes but maintained a healthy dialogue over freight rate levels and sailings was generally maintained. The two companies even joined forces to acquire the Bombay & Persia Steam Navigation Company (later the Mogul Line, a leading carrier of Moslems on pilgrimage) in 1912.

In 1931 Asiatic was restructured initially in response to the world-wide slump in trade and later in 1934 in recognition of the growth of nationalism in both Burma and India, which lead to the establishment of locally-based companies in both countries. At the same time, Asiatic's previously good relationship with BI broke down a rate war ensued. The matter was resolved by a tripartite agreement between Asiatic, BI and Scindia (the Indian national line) but the eventual outcome was BI's takeover of Asiatic.

The P&O Years

BI acquired a controlling 63% interest in Asiatic in November 1934, rising to 74% in January 1935. At this time the Ismay connection terminated, and both Asiatic and Mogul Line became part of the P&O Group. Mogul was sold to Indian interests in 1960, and BI acquired the remaining Asiatic shares in February 1961.



In October 1965 management of Asiatic's ships passed to the P&O Group's new tramp shipping management company Hain Nourse, and by 1971 Asiatic Steam was a dormant company, renamed P&O Bulk Shipping Ltd in 1977.

Archive Collection

A limited collection of manuscript material was deposited on permanent loan to the [National Maritime Museum](#), Greenwich, London, by P&O in the 1970s. The scope of the collection is restricted to: a continuous series of directors' minute books from 1878 to 1968; a similar series of annual accounts to 1965; and a historical file on the settlement of the 1930s freight war. Please consult the NMM [catalogue](#) directly for a precise list.

Selected Published Sources

Laxon, W A, *Asiatic Steam Navigation Company 1878-1963* (World Ship Society, Kendal, 1963)