

Shipping Company

Brief History



Eastern & Australian Steam Navigation Company

Operator of passenger and cargo liner services between Australia, Southeast Asia and the Far East



Pre-P&O Years

Established in 1873, the Eastern and Australian 'Mail' Steamship Company Ltd was the product of a contract between the Government of Queensland and four British and Australian merchants to carry mails between Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, Queensland and Sydney (later extending to Hong Kong and Melbourne). In 1880 the mail contract was not renewed and the original company was subsequently wound up. A new company was formed, The Eastern and Australian Steamship Company Ltd, as it was now called, concentrated its resources on the Australia to Hong Kong route, eventually spreading further east to Shanghai and Japan carrying passengers and cargo.

In later years, E&A faced fierce competition from China Navigation Company and Japan's Nippon Yusen Kaisha, culminating in the takeover of E&A by Lord Inchcape in 1918. Despite Lord Inchcape's position as P&O Chairman, and the publication of E&A's details in some P&O handbooks, E&A continued to exist as an independent entity until 1946 when P&O and its subsidiaries British India Steam Navigation Company and Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand each acquired a quarter share with the Inchcape-owned Australasian United Steam Navigation Company retaining the balance. This arrangement continued for another 20 years until 1966 when P&O acquired E&A outright.

First manned by British and later by Australian and Chinese crews, E&A ships played a prominent role in the development of the Australian Merchant Marine. Throughout the inter-war years Eastern and Australian continued to operate between Australia and the Far East, although the shipping routes were slightly altered. Vessels now sailed from Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Townsville to Rabaul, Manila, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Yokohama. By the onset of the Great Depression in the 1930s, the fleet had shrunk to only three passenger/cargo liners, the ex-BI *Tanda* and the ex-P&O *Nellore* and *Nankin*. E&A managed to survive into the Second World War, when its fleet was switched to operate between Australia and India under the guidance of the BI Company. However, *Nankin* was captured by the Japanese in May 1942 and in June and July of 1944 *Nellore* and *Tanda*, its only other ships, were both lost to enemy action.



The P&O Years

E&A did not become fully operational again until after the reorganisation of shareholdings mentioned above. In May 1946 the cargo liners *Empire Joy* and *Empire Dynasty* were purchased from the Ministry of Transport in Britain and renamed *Nellore* and *Eastern* respectively and in January 1947 *Nankin* (ex-*Mount Holyoke Victory*) was added. The fleet was thereafter maintained by the transfer of ships from other P&O Group companies, with the exception of *Arafura* which was built for E&A in 1954. Passenger/cargo services were revived in 1965 by *Aramac*, formerly New Zealand

Shipping Company's *Remuera* (originally Cunard's *Parthia*) and replaced in 1969 by P&O's *Cathay* which was joined by her sister *Chitral* in 1970.

1970 also saw the establishment of Australia Japan Container Line, an offshoot of Overseas Containers Limited (in which P&O was a partner) and to which E&A's cargo shipping interests were transferred together with those of China Navigation Company. E&A's remaining cargo liners were disposed of, and *Cathay* and *Chitral* were sold in 1975.

Archive Collection

The E&A records were deposited on permanent loan by P&O to the [National Maritime Museum](#), Greenwich. Contents include a copy of the 1873 mail contract with the Government of Queensland, the memorandum and Articles of Association of the third company (1894) and account books, 1894 to 1898 and 1937 through to 1963. Annual returns exist for the years 1920 to 1969, financial accounts for the years 1953 to 1963, and there is a run of minutes of board meetings from 1916 to 1969. Tonnage data between 1948 and 1969 also includes the contract and hull specifications for *Arafura*, 1952 to 1953.

The collection also includes early papers of Australia Japan Container Line, including Board papers 1968-1970, forward planning and costing files 1966-1970, and files on relations with other companies of the same period. For a complete list of the material held at the Museum, it is recommended that you consult the NMM [catalogue](#) directly.

Selected Published Sources

Laxon, W A, 'The Eastern Mails: The Story of the Eastern and Australian Steamship Company Ltd' in *Sea Breezes* (October 1963)

Olsen, William, *Lion of the China Sea* (P&O Australia, Sydney, 1978)