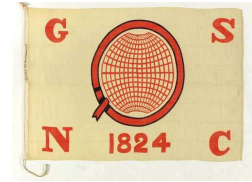


Shipping Company

Brief History



General Steam Navigation Company

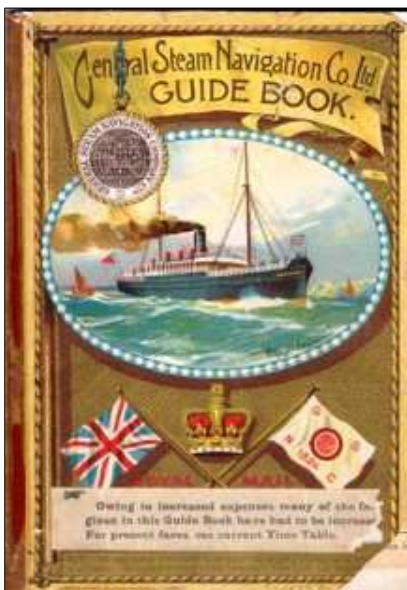


Operator of coastal, short-sea and ferry services in the UK and to the near-Continent and the Mediterranean, and excursion steamers on the Thames

Pre-P&O Years

In 1821, a group of London businessmen including W J Hall, a shipowner, and Thomas Brockelbank, a timber merchant from Deptford, agreed to form a syndicate to develop steamship services. Their first steamer was the *James Watt* which inaugurated their London to Leith service in 1821. Also running at that time, between London and Margate, was Brockelbank's own *Eagle*, the first in a long line of Thames paddle steamers to bear this name.

In June, 1824, the group recommended the 'immediate establishment of a joint stock company for navigating by steam'. As a result, the General Steam Navigation Company was incorporated by an Act of Parliament with a nominal capital of £2 million. Its founders intended to establish world-wide shipping links, and the company's house flag therefore centred upon a globe, but these ambitions were subsequently revised, and in the end GSN's operations rarely moved beyond the UK and near-Continental trades, and the Mediterranean. The company distinguished itself as the first British company operating a steamer service to foreign ports, and the earliest steam-ship undertaking on the Thames.



GSN was at first confined to the passenger business, most notably the London to Margate service which became immensely popular and for several years the annual number of passengers exceeded a million. It was not until the late 1820s that GSN applied to the government for permission to transport cargo, whereupon they moved into the carriage of live cattle and sheep from the Continent, a trade upon which much of its prosperity was to be founded in the 19th century.

In addition to GSN's routes already in existence between London, Hull, Leith, services to Ipswich, Newcastle, Sunderland and Berwick were added. Before long, regular services were opened up between London, Hamburg, Rotterdam, Antwerp, Ostend, Calais, Boulogne, Lisbon and Gibraltar and from Brighton to Le Havre and Dieppe.

By August 1825, GSN possessed a fleet of 15 steamers that were built on the banks of Deptford Creek and they had also purchased the old East India Company depot there, turning it into a yard for the maintenance and repair of its vessels. By 1833 the company was

carrying mails from London to Hamburg, Ostend, Boulogne and Rotterdam. In 1834 they obtained a further Act of Incorporation which enlarged its operations on these services. In 1836, GSN further expanded by acquiring the business of the London and Edinburgh Steam Packet Company, consisting of six steamships, premises and warehouses, and at about the same time, the steamships of a rival Thames company, the Margate Steam Packet Company, were also purchased. By the time The Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O) received its Royal Charter at the end of 1840, GSN already owned 40 steamers employed on its various foreign services and home trades.

The 1860s and 1870s were relatively prosperous years for GSN save disruptions caused by an outbreak of plague among cattle on the Continent, severe winters which caused several northern European ports to become ice-bound, general disorganisation in North Europe produced by the Franco-Prussian war, and railways biting deeper into its passenger business. An Order in Council of 1884 virtually brought to an end the important and lucrative trade in live animals from the Continent by the early 1890s, many of GSN's steamers were laid up, and the company's performance declined.



In the 1880s the Company made strenuous efforts to revive the pleasure steamer business on the Thames, dormant since the *Princess Alice* disaster, and succeeded in restoring public confidence in the excursion paddlers which every year carried many thousands of Londoners down river to such places as Southend, Margate, Clacton and Ramsgate.

In 1902 GSN revised its financial structure. Its capital was reduced, and the company registered under the Companies Act. By 1906, it was in a position to take over John Crisp and Son, whose activities included not only a shipping service between London and East Anglia, but also a river trade, which provided the company with a fleet of Norfolk wherries. Some years later, in 1909, GSN acquired the freehold of Brewers, Chesters and Galley Quays, near Tower Bridge, developing further its wharfage interests, and consolidating its long association with the London river.

At the end of the First World War, GSN was becoming a prize worth having, and began to attract the attention of larger operators, keen to acquire it as a feeder service for their deep-water trades. Eventually an offer of £5/10/- for each ordinary share was received from Gray, Dawes & Co on behalf of Lord Inchcape, former chairman of GSN and now Chairman of P&O. This was accepted by a majority of shareholders in January 1920, and Inchcape sold his shares on to P&O itself in November the same year.



The P&O Years

Although P&O kept a watching brief of GSN respecting the way it ran its business the involvement in day-to-day activities was slight. GSN concentrated on the steady development of its existing trades as well as the acquisition of a number of significant subsidiaries beginning with the partial acquisition of Great Yarmouth Shipping Company in 1923 in

partnership with T Small & Co (they were eventually bought out by GSN in 1931). In 1935, Moss Hutchison Line acquired from the liquidators of the Royal Mail Group; the New Medway Steam Packet Company subject to a simple takeover offer a year later; and Grand Union (Shipping) was purchased in 1948.

In the 1950s GSN extended its shipping services to Canadian waters and also acquired control of Silver City, operators of cross-Channel air ferries carrying a handful of private cars each, as well as flying boat operators Aquila Airways, but these investments were neither successful nor long-lived.

By the mid 1960s GSN's Thames excursion services had been closed as leisure activity patterns changed, and its conventional routes were being challenged by the roll-on/roll-off ferry and the container ship. GSN became a leading player in two Anglo-European consortia, North Sea Ferries and Normandy Ferries, which became the backbone of what ultimately evolved into P&O Ferries after P&O re-organised its subsidiaries into five operating divisions in October 1971. The GSN minority shareholders were also bought out in October 1971, and its former operations became part of P&O European and Air Transport Division, the short sea fleet being merged with the former Coast Lines operations as P&O Short Sea Shipping, soon to be rebranded P&O Ferries.

Archive Collection

The bulk of the collection was placed on permanent loan to the [National Maritime Museum](#), Greenwich by P&O. Manuscripts ranging from management and operational papers, board minutes, annual reports, limited financial records, some passenger carriage information, staff records and those pertaining to subsidiary companies are housed in their library. It is recommended to consult the NMM [catalogue](#) to determine the full range of material.

Records of Grand Union (Shipping) and Great Yarmouth Shipping Co are included in the GSN collection at the NMM; records of Moss Hutchison Line Ltd are held by [Merseyside Maritime Museum](#).



Selected Published Sources

Comford, L Cope, *A Century of Sea Trading 1824-1924: The General Steam Navigation Company Ltd*. (A & C Black, London, 1924)

Hancock, H E, *Semper Fideles The Saga of the Navvies, 1924-1948: being an account of the services of the ships and men of the General Steam Navigation Company Limited, in peace and war throughout the period 1924-1948*. (London, 1949)

Robins, Nick, *Birds of the Sea: 150 years of the General Steam Navigation Company*. (Bernard McCall, Bristol, 2007)