

www.lancmag.com

December 2017

# Lancashire

**& North West** magazine

The surprising story of Sir John Alcock

Gok Wan shops in Preston

A Dickens of a Christmas

It's Behind You! Best Pantomimes

Going to sea on the Ben-my-Chree

A Great British Christmas with Master Chef Tom Bridge

£2.45



124

**BELOW:** The Steam Packet Flagship the Ben-my-Chree.

**MAIN:** The Steam Packet fleet in Douglas Harbour. L to R the Manannan and the Ben-my-Chree.



# Going to Sea on the Ben-my-Chree - our main link with the Isle of Man

by Andrew Harris

There is something special about sailing at sea. Travelling by bus, car, train or plane is routine but sailing is always different – if for no other reason because of the ever-changing mood of the sea. In no other mode of transport is there the same freedom to move around and use time in different ways. It is different.

The Isle of Man Steam Packet Company has been serving the island community – where it is known as the ‘Steam Packet’ for short - since 1830 and will celebrate its 200th anniversary in a mere 13 years. The company started with wooden paddle steamers which gave way to steel vessels with propellers. These were followed by turbine steamers then side-loading car ferries succeeded in turn by modern roll-on roll-off ferries virtually all in the range 2,500-3,000 gross tonnes. Since 1998 the company has operated the sixth *Ben-my-Chree* which is 125 metres long – and at 12,747 gross tonnes is more than 2 ½ times the size of the largest of the previous ‘steam packets’ and able to carry up to 630 passengers and 275 cars. It is the only vessel operating an all year service as the company’s twin-hulled fastcraft

*Manannan* is limited to a seasonal service from March to November because it is unsuited to the worst of the winter weather.

The *Ben-my-Chree* sails from Heysham to Douglas at 0215 and 1415 hrs daily. My route to the afternoon sailing was via M6 junction 34 and the newly-opened link road which avoids the bottleneck which is the centre of Lancaster. The Steam Packet terminal is tired but welcoming with a café serving hot drinks and snacks. Foot passengers face a short walk to board where they have 4 choices: the main lounge, Niarbyl Lounge, Premium Lounge – at £17.50 per person with free drinks and service – or more expensive 4-berth en-suite cabins where passengers can make their own tea or coffee. Car-borne passengers can use steps or the lift to move from the car decks to deck 7 where all the passenger facilities except the cabins and the members-only Manannan Executive Lounge are located.

Your columnist tested all these facilities for you. The restaurant offers a good range of main meals and lighter options. The chicken curry was an appetizing and full meal at just under £10 but there are much

cheaper options. The Legends Bar offered great and friendly service from Craig and Gill – pictured - but a pint of lager costs £4.05. The Premium Lounge provided comfortable seating – but not for children – with free non-alcoholic drinks, nibbles and service from the bar and restaurant. On my journey Chris was helpful and friendly. The shop is surprisingly well stocked with – like planes and airports – a great emphasis on the likes of perfumes and aftershave lotions. There is also a good range of Isle of Man branded products for the nostalgic and those who have to bear gifts.

The captain on my voyage was Shaun Rooney who is one of 6 permanent ‘masters’ who typically work one week on and one week off to undertake daily return trips from Douglas – the island’s main harbour and capital which is home to half the population of the Isle of Man. All the masters – plus 4 who are temporary - serve on the *Ben-my-Chree* and the *Manannan* fastcraft as needed. Captain Rooney has been with the Steam Packet company for 16 years following a career with Shell Tankers and the P & O shipping line. He is clearly pleased and proud of his charge and explains that the *Ben-my-Chree* is good for all but the most extreme weather conditions at sea but the challenge is manoeuvring this large vessel in





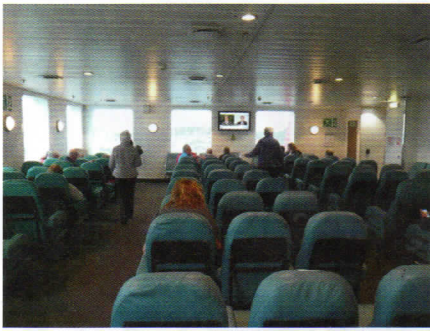
**TOP LEFT: The Steam Packet check-in desks at Heysham. ABOVE: The partly loaded car deck on the Ben-my-Chree. ABOVE LEFT: The leaving of Heysham. BELOW: The Ben-my-Chree underway at sea.**



the comparatively small harbours of Douglas and Heysham. For this purpose Captain Rooney explains that the *Ben-my-Chree* is equipped with powerful bow thrusters which enable the ship to be moved sideways to the dockside without the need for tugs. By alternatively running the port and starboard main propellers forward and aft at differing revolutions the ship can be spun around then reversed onto the berth. It's a clever manoeuvre which all Steam Packet captains

have mastered as it is needed in both harbours.

The passage from Heysham to Douglas is scheduled to take 3 ½ hours arriving at 17:45 but we achieve 18 knots and arrive ahead of schedule. Quite speedy for your columnist who would plod away on a sailing yacht at 5 knots and take more than 10 hours to make Douglas from the Lancashire coast. Both types of vessel face the same challenges in view of increasing



**TOP RIGHT: The servery in Ben-my-Chree's main lounge. TOP: The Niarbyl Lounge. MIDDLE LEFT: The Premium Lounge on the Ben-my-Chree. ABOVE: Chris's place of work in the Premium Lounge: the source of much refreshment. ABOVE RIGHT: Craig and Gill who enliven the Legends Bar.**

activity in the Irish Sea. To the south of the preferred course are gas rigs with their exclusion zones for safety and security. To the north are the newer offshore wind farms which are a great success but also a hazard to navigation. Captain Rooney explains the traffic lanes to be used which limit how any vessel can freely navigate what was – until quite recently – a sea without any obstructions to be avoided.

As we approach Douglas we encounter the 'Douglas Head Swell' caused by a confluence of currents. On this day there is just a slight increased pitching of the ship but still noticeable. In other conditions a combination of the relatively shallow Irish Sea – which causes short and steep waves – and these offshore currents explain a brief turbulence as vessels of any size arrive or depart Douglas Harbour.

As we arrive in Douglas I must report two amazing periods in the history of the Isle of Man Steam Packet Company. Vessels and crews of the company were actively involved in both world wars. During the First World War, 11 of the total Steam Packet fleet of 15 were requisitioned by the Admiralty. 4 were lost, 3 were retained by the Admiralty and

just 4 returned to Steam Packet service. A much earlier *Ben-my-Chree* and the first *Manxman* had pioneering roles as aircraft and seaplane carriers. An early *King Orry* – there have been six – was attached to the British Grand Fleet and in 1918 led the surrendered German High Seas Fleet into the main British naval anchorage and base at Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands!

In the Second World War no fewer than 10 of the company's 16 ships were requisitioned by the Admiralty. 4 were lost. The 1940 Dunkirk evacuation was the company's finest hour. The fourth *Mona's Isle* was the first ship to leave Dover and complete the round trip during the evacuation. No fewer than 8 Steam Packet ships took part in this operation and rescued a total of 24,699 British troops - an amazing 7.3% of all those evacuated from Dunkirk!

On the 29th May 1940 the Steam Packet crews and company paid a terrible price for this achievement. 3 ships were lost:

- *Mona's Queen* was sunk by a mine off Dunkirk



**LEFT: Captain Shaun Rooney – Master of the Ben-my-Chree. TOP: The bridge of the Ben-my-Chree. MIDDLE LEFT: Arriving in Douglas Harbour. Reversing onto the Linkspan. BOTTOM: The Isle of Man welcome – by Judy at the Sea Terminal.**



- *Fenella was sunk by air attack on the same day whilst berthed alongside*
- *King Orry was heavily damaged by air attacks that day and sank off the beaches early the following day.*

As part of the 70th anniversary of the Dunkirk evacuation the anchor of *Mona's Queen* was retrieved and sited at Kallow Point in Port St Mary on the Isle of Man as a memorial to all the Steam Packet crews who took part in the war.

Steam Packet has a proud history and a challenging future. The company has had 4 owners over the last 21 years. The number of sea and air visits to the Isle of Man is increasing year by year – a further 1.7% in 2016 – but the passenger and freight volumes will never support the competition seen on other routes. For this reason the service is governed by a User Agreement with the Isle of Man Government but its future has to be decided before new investment and ships can be justified. Subject to this, the Steam Packet plan to replace the 19-year old *Ben-my-Chree* by 2019/21 with a new-build vessel 140 metres long and able to carry 800 passengers. It is proposed to retain the *Ben-my-Chree* as a third vessel to provide back-up to the fleet. We will be seeing the sixth *Ben-my-Chree* regularly then occasionally for many years to come – still providing an essential service for the Isle of Man.

**Andrew Harris gratefully acknowledges the help provided by the IOMSPC Marketing Manager Renée Caley and Captain Shaun Rooney in the preparation of this article. The external ship images are courtesy of the Isle of Man Steam Packet Company and other pictures are by your columnist. Our June 2015 article about the Isle of Man – The Mysterious Ellan Vannin - can be found at [www.andreweharris.co.uk](http://www.andreweharris.co.uk) under 'Published Articles'.**

