

OCEANIC MAJESTY

I've recently been laid low with a particularly nasty cold and cough, and consequently I don't know how many times each day I've seized the TV remote and done a quick review of the umpteen plus channels that are at our disposal. But only two days ago, I stumbled across a programme gem that had me truly hooked for well over an hour. What made it even more enjoyable was there were no adverts about soap powder, Kentucky Fried Chicken, or what make-up I needed to rub into my skin at night to cure my face of lines, creases or jowls.

The programme that held my attention was about the old Cunard ocean liners, the **RMS** (Royal Mail Ship) **Queen Mary** and her sister ship, the **RMS Queen Elizabeth**. I well remember, seeing both ships moored stem to stern in Southampton and it was an incredible sight. In fact, it was because a certain TR4A enabled me to see these two oceanic leviathans when I did.

For the history buffs, Queen Mary was the older of the two vessels, but only by about a year. They both entered service just before World War Two and mostly, if not exclusively on the New York-Southampton route. This is because trans-Atlantic travel by air was pretty well non-existent. However, with the outbreak of war and especially following the Pearl Harbor attack, both vessels underwent major refits as troop carriers and because they were both so fast, they amazingly escaped the attention of German U-Boats in the north Atlantic.



RMS Queen Mary

With a return to peace in 1945, many thousands of US and Canadian troops went home on one or the other vessel and eventually, after two very costly refits, they returned to their peace-time roles as luxury liners.

RMS Queen Mary was eventually retired at the end of 1967 and took up residence as a floating hotel at Long Beach, California, where she can still be found. That said, my TV programme informed me she is now in such dire need of very urgent and necessary

repairs amounting to many millions of anyone's currency, that her actual value as scrap metal is a mere fraction. I feel her days are numbered.

Similarly, her sister ship, the **RMS Queen Elizabeth** also retired at the end of 1968. Initially, she had a home at Port Everglades in Florida but was then moved to Hong Kong where she caught fire, partially capsized and was so badly damaged that scrapping her was the only option.

But this article isn't a tribute to Cunard, the company that owned and operated them.

It's oriented to how Standard-Triumph saw Cunard being able to play an important role in the company's export sales activities.

More specifically, it addressed the then

facility of being able to buy your Standard-Triumph car in the US - or any other export



RMS Queen Elizabeth

territory, collect it from the factory or in London while on vacation, use the car for the vacation – and then ship it home when the vacation was over.

This process was known as the 'Personal Export Scheme' and every European car maker milked that facility for every sales dollar it could get out of it.

In 1966, someone in the Public Relations Department in Coventry had something of a 'lightbulb' moment when he or she realised a very valuable sales opportunity was being missed. The argument the originator propounded to a number of more cautious sales executives, went something like this.

"Now hear this. Each year, the Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth bring thousands of American and Canadian tourists to the UK and Europe. What's more, they'll be at sea for at least five days with little to do except enjoy the on-board facilities, so why not try to sell them a car while they're at sea?"

To which the obvious rejoinder was *"well, how would we do that?"*

"Simple. We put a north American spec TR on board on display, train someone from the Purser's office in taking the deposit, processing the order forms and then telexing the order to us from mid-Atlantic. That should give us enough time to hoik a suitable car out of already built export stock, get it to the UK handover point at a mutually convenient date, and bingo – one more car sold – and all from the middle of the Atlantic! It's such a blinding flash of the obvious, why on earth hasn't anyone done this before?"

The answer to that question could have easily been answered if a little bit of research had been done. The Rootes Group had done a similar thing a few years earlier with the Sunbeam Alpine (and failed) and even in the early 1950's, MG did the same over a three year period using the MG TD and MG TF models to attract and win some much-needed sales dollars.

MG failed too!

But quite apart from not doing that essential research, no-one at Standard-Triumph actually did any additional investigation about the types of passengers likely to be on board either ship at the time, in terms of their ages, motoring needs and the possibility some of them could be persuaded to buy a new Triumph.

Also, was this a 'rising' market? Could Standard-Triumph achieve what the others hadn't?

Almost certainly, no-one asked these fairly elementary questions of Cunard – or if they did, they didn't believe the answers.

Some of the facts were as follows:

1. The Queen Mary was due to retire from service within twelve months. – i.e. December 1967.
2. The Queen Elizabeth would do the same a year later – December 1968.
3. Yes, they would be replaced with the **Queen Elizabeth 2**, but she was going to be a very different ship and would be undertaking many cruises to different world destinations. Her service between New York and Southampton would be 'slotted in' when she wasn't doing a cruise.
4. Since the very early sixties – and especially with the arrival of the Boeing 707, Bristol Britannia and De Havilland Comet, more and more people were crossing the Atlantic by air because it was faster and a lot cheaper – especially on the overnight flights that dumped you in London before or at dawn.
5. Because of the massive increase in air travel, Cunard had seen their passenger headcounts diminishing and those people who did still want to do the sea voyage in preference to flying, were (mostly) age-wise, well past the wind-in-your-hair sports car brigade. In terms of what they wanted, this general population group was a lot

older, erring far more to what Aston Martin, Bentley, Daimler-Benz, Jaguar and Rolls Royce had to offer.

So, five rather important criteria that should have been thoroughly investigated – but were not. Those in the corridors of power at Standard-Triumph in Coventry thought selling a car on a trans-Atlantic passenger ship was an excellent idea and, as I was working at that time on the American desk in Coventry in Personal Export Sales, I was tasked with finding a suitable car. and ensuring it was delivered to the quayside in Southampton on a specified date. Choosing the car was the easy bit.



The London Service Division at Park Royal

The company always held a small stock of US specification sports cars and the one to be given its 'sea legs' was a TR4A in white with red upholstery, chrome wire wheels, a white soft top and hood cover and all topped off with an overdrive.

Ideally, and if we'd had the time, the car would have been shipped down to the London Service Division to receive 'the Jock Brown treatment'.

For those who have never heard of this gentleman, Mr. A.G. 'Jock' Brown had formerly been Chief Inspector in Coventry and what he didn't know about preparing cars for exhibition or

display, wasn't worth knowing about. Jock Brown, had uncompromising standards regarding perfection and the cars that graced the company's display stands in London, Paris, Geneva, Frankfurt and New York motor shows were always winning first prize in the Coachwork and Paint Finish categories. Jock Brown saw to that!

This time around however, Mr. Brown declined the opportunity of preparing the car in focus as he had other 'exhibition priorities' to deal with and so the TR found itself coming under the gaze of Coventry's Factory Transport Manager, affectionately known to all and sundry as 'Big Jim' Holbrook. I never did find out why or how Jim got his moniker as he was of normal height and quite slim, but interestingly, 'Big Jim' had a department that was almost as good as Jock Brown's London Body Shop in preparing car paint finish. But 'Big Jim' also had a responsibility in preparing and maintaining Standard-Triumph's fleet of Press Cars – and in that area, Jim and his team truly excelled. In those now far-off days, it was rare for any Standard-Triumph car to get a bad press on the performance side of things.

It was a one horse race.

The TR4A destined for the Queen Mary would receive attention from 'Big Jim' and his cohort of body repairers/performance tuners/wonder creators and it was into the hallowed portals of the Transport Department at the factory that the TR vanished one afternoon, just one week before it was due to be loaded on the Queen Mary. In that time, 'Big Jim's' team made the doors close with a soft click, the seats moved as if with electric assistance, while stowing the soft top was simplicity personified AND without pinching one's fingers. The trunk lid opened and closed with a silky smoothness, as did the bonnet. The choke and heater controls were light and easy to operate and the level of shine that 'Big Jim's' team achieved with the paintwork suggested it was probably an inch thick! I never did find out what the company

used for car polish but the finished result was always far better than any product I've used, even Maguiars.



The display area. The car sat between the four pillars (where the chairs are seen) with additional lighting from sides and above.

the same massive hole in the ship's side. Armed with my Pass to go on board, I sprinted up the gangway and soon found myself in a huge atrium. There was an excess of highly polished hardwood panelling, pile carpet that felt about a foot thick and lots of dazzling brightwork and lighting that left me in no doubt that passengers on the **RMS Queen Mary** would not be short-changed in having somewhere to stroll or take their ease.

It was about mid-afternoon when I entered this orb of unashamed luxury and afternoon tea was being served in the very best British tradition. Diamond

shaped cucumber sandwiches with similarly prepared ones containing egg and cress, buttered slices of bread with their crusts removed, little dishes of fruit preserves, dainty cakes and highly polished teapots, hot water and milk jugs, the whole ensemble - including the china and cutlery - subtly monogrammed with just one word, **Cunard**.

In the background was the sound of the Palm Court orchestra gently reminding everyone that if the surroundings and afternoon tea weren't enough, where they found themselves was 'Class' in capital letters.

A man stood before me.

Dressed in a black tail-coat, with striped, dark grey trousers, a highly starched white shirt with detachable stiff collar housing a perfectly knotted silk tie of unquestionable quality, a requisite amount of equally starched cuff protruded from his coat sleeves, while the shine on his shoes was a more than adequate alternative to a mirror. There was no doubt that I was facing no less a person than the Purser.

He extended a hand.

"Mr. Macartney, from the Standard Motor Company in Coventry, I feel?"

Precisely one week later, I was at Southampton docks to be in attendance while the car was loaded. Close alongside the gangplank giving passengers and others access to the vessel, a large hole had appeared into which various timber platforms piled high with passenger luggage were being brought alongside the liner. This was done with a large crane whose operator was perched in an eyrie at about the same height as the top of the Queen Mary's funnels.

Before I knew it, the TR4A was being pushed on to another timber platform and rapidly hoisted aloft to stop alongside



The second class dining room

Oh, the voice.

That understated, quiet British accent, that was akin to the very best cut crystal glassware and mostly found (in those now far off days) as a mandarin in Her Majesty's Treasury, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Ministry of Defence or simply as a Minister without Portfolio. Furthermore, and without question, this man was without any doubt at all, the typical product of the British public (private) school system. I intentionally didn't ask him which school but I'm sure it wasn't Eton. Old Etonians always appear to be extremely pleased with themselves and this man most certainly did not fit that Eton College prototype. In my view, he was either 'Harrow' or 'Winchester' – and at a pinch, he might even have been 'Charterhouse' or 'Westminster'.

Believe me, you really can tell from the inflexions and mannerisms, but "top marks, chum," I thought, for getting the company name right. You see, those of us who worked there never ever referred to it as Triumph. Right up until the day the site was demolished in the 1990's it was always and still is known in Coventry and district as 'the Standard' – even if you *didn't* work there. This fact has escaped the knowledge and understanding of many enthusiasts who wrongly persist in referring to the former factory as just Triumph. As history has recorded, both Triumph factories in Coventry vanished in November 1940, thanks to the German Luftwaffe, and there was never a later one in the years that followed.

Anyway, having established who was talking to who, the Purser raised a hand to some unseen flunkies who seemingly appeared out of the woodwork.

"As discussed at our meeting this morning, the motor car is now on board and being pushed to the desk in the display area adjacent to Reception and my day cabin. When in place and sited to Mr. Macartney's and my satisfaction, please ensure the cars keys are left with my deputy and I need to be notified to approve the final display before Mr. Macartney leaves this vessel".

He turned again to face me.

"In the meantime Mr. Macartney, perhaps Cunard can have the privilege of providing you with afternoon tea – with our compliments, of course!"

Would I decline the offer? Of course not! I'd missed lunch and had a long drive home from Southampton and in the days when our roads were sadly lacking in terms of somewhere to rest and eat. All I can say is that despite many decades later as I write this, that afternoon tea was truly outstanding.

The orchestra greatly soothing and the deckhands quickly got the car in position. Then, summoned from his own inner sanctum, the Purser gave it his approval and expressed delight with the way the lights showed the car to advantage and the rest was down to me.

At this juncture, I was introduced to a very attractive receptionist whose appearance, manner, figure and several other attributes that always interest young men, was seemingly going to be the one responsible for dishing out brochures, contacting us by telex as orders were accruing and filling in the various forms to supply a car tax free. This girl was a whizz with her eyes and body language and apart from a rather curious feeling deep inside me of the most fervent attraction, I rapidly came to the conclusion she was inevitably of considerable interest to those members of the crew with a direct reporting line to the Commodore. Though I say it myself, she and I got along just fine – but as I reflected on my long drive home, not fine enough! Too soon, far too soon, it was time for me to take my leave, as three short blasts on Queen Mary's whistle was the audible warning to people on board who were not travelling to New York, to vacate the vessel.

And so I started the long drive home and back to the factory for work the next day. By the time I sat down at my desk the following morning, the **RMS Queen Mary** was already some way into the Atlantic Ocean and hopefully that gorgeous receptionist would be stirring up interest among the passengers to buy a Triumph for us to onward ship to the States or Canada when it was built?

And orders for people coming the other way and wanting a car for use on their European vacation?

No chance! Not one. Not even the smell of one.

Well, that's not strictly true. We did have an enquiry for a car, but its destination was in a far flung market with a very demanding specification for climate and fuel type and we couldn't meet the spec from the small number of finished cars at our disposal. What's more, the customer wanted it immediately on arriving at Southampton. No chance. To build a car for his needs would take two months!

Heigh ho. But looking back, it all seemed a good idea to someone at the time and a novel way to sell a new car – but the inescapable fact is we didn't – but then, as we later discovered from assiduous questioning from our contacts at Rootes Group and BMC, neither did Sunbeam or MG ever win business that same way. But it was fun while it lasted and in the years that have passed since the day I saw that rather nicely prepared TR4A safely aboard, my happy thoughts about the car itself, rapidly transition to something else.

Not a car this time, just a delightful, gorgeous and stunningly vivacious girl in her navy blue jacket and matching skirt, her high heeled shoes, Cunard blouse with its complementing light blue Cunard silk scarf around her neck and legs to die for, all wrapped in a mind-boggling package that would make any thinking man of any age, to do a double-take!

I'm now well into my eighties and while I still have many happy memories of my days at the Standard Motor Company in Coventry and London, together with the cars it made of all models, the Cunard Purser's assistant and the colour of her eyes is rarely out of the Top Three really special moments of recall.