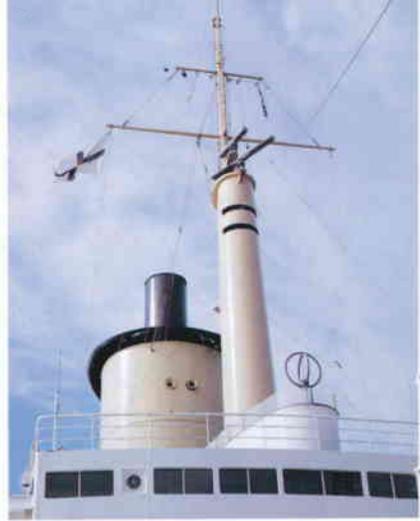


Although a surprising number of shipping lines have invested heavily in refurbishing their older ships so that they conform to the recently introduced safety requirements, not since the 1970's has the outlook for classic liners looked so foreboding. With a vast fleet of atrium laden super ships crowding the waves and those 1997 SOLAS requirements calling for expensive alterations, some of the world's most beautiful vessels have recently been forced to shut down their engines for ever. Fortunately, *Rotterdam* continues under another flag and name. 1997's greatest casualty was *Canberra*, P&O's 1961 built last official liner. Just twenty five years ago she was the flagship of a large fleet of ocean liners built to carry people from one far off destination to another. Then, names such as *Orsova*, *Chusan*, *Iberia*, *Himalaya*, and *Orcades* were as familiar as *Crystal Harmony*, *Song of America*, *Dreamward* and *Sensation* are today.

Peter Knego managed to see a handful of these ships before they disappeared from the oceans, one in particular made a very lasting impression. Here is the story of his last visit to a true dowager of the seas, an...



Ode to *Oronsay* by Peter Knego

Early on the overcast morning of August 26, 1975, I awaited the final arrival of the P&O liner *Oronsay* at Pier 35 in San Francisco.

While not the biggest, or even the most luxurious liner of her day, there was none the less something magical about *Oronsay*. The second in a trio of ships built for the Orient Line (later merged into P&O), *Oronsay* of 1951 was the last afloat in 1975. The similar *Orcades* of 1948 was demolished in 1973 and the sleeker and slightly larger *Orsova* of 1954 had just been cut up earlier that year. At 28,000 tons and 708 feet, *Oronsay* was built for long voyages to exotic lands, transporting people from the UK around the world via Suez and Panama to the vast reaches of the British Empire. 50% larger than the shiny new breed of cruise ships being built in the 70's, *Oronsay* was a heavy fuel consumer in an era of critical shortage and skyrocketing prices. While she sported full air-conditioning, two pools, stabilisers and many amenities necessary for cruising, her wood panelling, linoleum flooring, traditional furnishings and large number of cabins without facilities didn't fit P&O's

new image, especially with the recent acquisition of Princess Cruises.

Her raked, rust-streaked bow appeared from behind Pier 37, slowly gliding through the murky green water, two tugs churning along her red boot topping. While one could argue other British ships of her era were prettier (ie *Caronia*, *Arcadia*, *Edinburgh Castle* and *Aureol*) *Oronsay* had her good angles, especially from a 3/4 bow view. Her terraced superstructure with its open promenades culminating in a midships bridge platform, topped by a buff coloured funnel, itself topped with what was dubbed a "black bonnet" cap and a "stove pipe". As this great lady crept toward Pier 25 my heart raced with anticipation, my Instamatic camera clicking away as she came into full view. I clutched in my hand a letter from her captain, John Lefevre, its contents politely declining my request for a souvenir life ring (against company policy) but inviting me to visit him the next day at which time he would offer me a small momento to remember *Oronsay* by.

Several hours later, my twelve year old cousin (I was 14 at the time) and her best friend met me at

Below. *Oronsay* at Ibiza during a summer cruise in August 1966 and (above) her mast & funnel. Photos: John H Mason.



the pier for a visit to *Oronsay* (at that time seeing ships was a mere matter of filling out a visitor's pass). I took them through her public rooms from the elegant Balmoral Restaurant in its maize finery to the cinema at the top most Games deck. Not a ship lover, my cousin told me that she much preferred the *Royal Viking Sky*, ironically representing the sentiment of this new era *Oronsay* had sailed into quite succinctly. We left that afternoon as *Oronsay* overnighted in San Francisco.

The next morning I went back, bringing my photo album of ships to show Captain Lefevre. I presented his letter at the bureau as per his instructions and was escorted to his quarters. I had never met a captain before, let alone a P&O captain! Greeting me at his door with a warm handshake, he sat me down in his office as he conducted business on the phone. He apologised for being so busy but did take the time to look through my photos, smiling as he saw *Himalaya* (recently scrapped), *Arcadia* (the next to go), *Oriana* and *Canberra*. He joked that the *Pacific Princess* looked like a "motor launch" (unbeknown to him, she was to become his next command!). He told me that after disembarking her passengers in Hong Kong, *Oronsay* would destore some of her fittings and sail to the breakers in Kaohsiung in early October. I fought back the tears as we visited, sad that this would be the era I would spend my teens in, lamenting doomed or deceased liners. He asked me to come back to his office before I disembarked and I left to walk her decks once more.

Running my hands along her wood panelled corridors, I worked my way through the ship trying to absorb every minute detail, the murmur of passengers' voices in the cozy public rooms while announcements were made over the address system in pristine English accents; the vibration of the table settings in her dining rooms as the odour of curry emanated from her galleys; on her forward stair tower the scent of pine cleaner as crew members polished her flooring; a blast of warm air while passing the base of her funnel on Games Deck; the soot on her after decks and the crumbling tiles and rust in her pools; well worn teak decks and dirty ropes stored in crew areas. I would say good-bye to rooms with names like Orkney, Balmoral, Shetland, Firth and Tay, their dated furnishings and wood panelling relics of a crumbling era. *Oronsay* herself was named for an islet off Scotland, hence the theme of her rooms. This was before the trend of naming a ship with a "Royal" or "Regal" prefix and a topographic suffix such as "Sea" or "Sun" or vice versa.

I returned to the captain's office as the first call for visitors ashore was made. Captain Lefevre wished me godspeed and thanked me for caring about the *Oronsay* so much. When he instructed me to disembark the ship through the crew's gangway I was puzzled, until he presented me with a life ring, carefully wrapped in a muslin sack! Tears welling once more, I thanked him profusely for this generous gift and bade farewell. The passengers were out on

the decks now, their clothing and demeanour so different from the people I was used to seeing aboard the usual North American ships. An officer smiled as I disembarked, perhaps having been alerted not to stop me with my contraband cargo.

I found a spot on the pier to watch the sailing, marvelling at the display of flags *Oronsay* wore for this final departure. Aft of her funnel hung the pay-off pennant, a yard in length for all 21 years of service. Her decks were bright with passengers waving good-byes and multitudes of streamers flew from the ship to the pier as the gangways were gradually lifted and her lines cast. Slowly she eased out, belching black smoke, her pennant now waving wildly in the breeze. Three thundering blasts from her whistle echoed through the harbour and were met with a cacophony of salutes from ships great and small. Her mighty bow eased past, its "targe and broadsword" coat of arms plate growing smaller and smaller as she backed and turned. Another blast of her whistle while she dispatched her tugs, gained forward momentum and aimed toward the Pacific.

As I waved good-bye, I could hold back the tears no longer



... Her raked, rust-streaked bow appeared from behind Pier 37 on her last call at San Francisco. Photo: A very young Peter Knego.

Oronsay Factfile

Delivered to the Orient Line in 1951

Builder: Vickers Armstrong, Barrow in Furness

Launched 30 June 1950

Tonnage: 27,632 grt.

Length 708ft. Beam 93.5 ft

Shaft horse power: 42,500 to twin screws.

Service speed: 22 knots

Scrapped: Kaohsiung, September 1975