

RMS St Helena



Stanley Bruce

Passenger and cargo ship RMS (Royal Mail Ship) *St Helena* was the last ship to be fully built by Hall Russell and Co, Shipbuilders and Ship-Repairers, York Place, Aberdeen - but she very nearly wasn't.

If the yard had not been bought by A&P Appledore, and closed in 1989, the last ship built would have been Yard No995, *RMAS Salmaid* (A187), built for the Royal Maritime Auxiliary Service in 1986, for service in HMNB Portsmouth, and since sold by the Royal Navy, circa 2013, to Hays Ships Ltd, Portlethen, Aberdeen, and renamed *Kommandor Calum* after a conversion that included removal of her distinctive bow horns.

The *St Helena* was Hall Russell's Yard No1000 and was built with funds from the UK Government Overseas Development Agency (ODA). As far as I can remember, the original contract price was £19 million, but she ended up costing over £32 million. She was named after the island she was built to service. St Helena Island - one of the most remote inhabited islands in the world - is a



Launch of RMS *St Helena* in 1989 - Stanley Bruce is standing on the bow, directly above the 'S'. After the yard closed, the building hall was bought by Score, Peterhead, and it now forms the central part of their Peterhead facility at Inverurie, on the site of the former distillery

UK Overseas Territory, located 1200 miles off the West Coast of Africa, in the South Atlantic. The ship was built to also service Ascension Islands, Tristan da Cunha, and Cape Town, from the port of Cardiff.

The naming ceremony was carried out by Prince Andrew, who smashed the bottle on her bow at her launch, in 1989.

During the early stages of the building of RMS *St Helena*, Hall Russell went into receivership. It is worth noting here that the company had been turning a profit for decades. At the point of going into

receivership, all that existed of the ship in the building hall were her double bottom sections. Now, the 1.5m-high sections didn't even look like a ship at that early stage, and the yard management thought that the ODA might decide to have the ship built elsewhere. The belief was that if it looked like a good portion of the ship had been built, the contract would remain with Hall Russell and prospective new owners would be more likely to buy the yard.

Great efforts were therefore made to bring all the units (steel sections of the ship) out of the fabrication bays and into the building hall. The units forming the 'tween deck and the main deck were placed on top of each other, in their correct positions; tacked, and safely secured, but not faired and welded. Now when you entered the building hall, it looked like a ship - or at least the hull of a ship, basically as you see it in the launch photograph below.

The plan worked: A&P Appledore bought the yard and took on the contract to complete the vessel. The yard was saved,

and the workers all kept their jobs, although they were made redundant and then re-employed by the new owners.

Unfortunately, the new owners had underestimated how much it would cost to complete the build, as they thought the hull was complete. It took many weeks to get the units faired and welded. This was usually a difficult job, but it was made even more difficult because of the weight of other units on top of the ones being faired. Units usually had some distortion in the longitudinal direction, due to the welding;



RMS *St Helena* and RMAS *Salmaid* (right) - photographs by J Addison, Cullen



RMS *St Helena* in James Bay

however, the 'tween deck units also had distorted plates in the vertical direction, due to the weight of the main deck units sitting above. Although the yard had been saved, it was only a stay of execution and it ended up closing two years later, early in 1992.

Back to the ship: she has served the islanders of St Helena for 27 years and has been their sole lifeline to the outside world. The mayor of Jamestown, the capital of St Helena Island, was so elated about the new ship arriving, on 30 November 1990, that he declared a local holiday to celebrate her arrival, and around half of the islanders turned out to see her. She was about double the size of her predecessor, with more accommodation and cargo space, and I imagine they were very pleased when they first saw her. So important was she to the island that they produced a set of stamps to commemorate her maiden voyage, and another set on her 25th anniversary.

During her lifetime, RMS *St Helena* made 243 round trips from the island to the UK, covering 1.1 million miles. Although not sailing to the UK anymore, she is



RMS *St Helena* at Hall Russell outfitting quay - photograph by Stanley Bruce

currently still sailing between Ascension, Cape Town and the St Helena Island, and will do so until - according to the latest update - February 2018. While the island's first airport, costing £250 million, was certified 'open' last summer, turbulence and wind shear make it difficult for planes to land, and so there is still an important job to be done by the much-loved ship, made in Aberdeen.

"She is one of only two ocean-going vessels in the world still to carry the venerable title of Royal Mail Ship...RMS St Helena is not just a passenger vessel; it's a working ship, plying the Atlantic Ocean, carrying goods and people nearly halfway around the world. When you sail on the RMS, you are following in the wake of the generations of travellers and explorers who crossed the world's oceans in the leisureed days before air travel. A voyage on the RMS is an unforgettable experience: a blue water voyage on a working ship to unspoilt and remote islands." rms-st-helena.com



RMS *St Helena*

- Launched: 1989
- Delivered: 1990
- Gross Weight: 6767 tonnes
- Deadweight: 3130 tonnes
- Length: 105m
- Beam: 19.2m
- Draft: 6m
- Speed: 14.5 knots
- Accommodation: 156 passengers in 56 cabins
- Staff: 56 officers and crew



Stanley Bruce in 1988

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