

THE FIRST RAKAIA



This ship, besides being the first vessel to be built for the New Zealand Shipping Company, was the first of four sister ships built by J Blumer and Co. of Sunderland. She was registered with Lloyd's in November 1873 and was an iron ship of 1,057 gross tons. Her dimensions were approximately 210 feet by 34 feet by 19 feet. She completed nearly 20 voyages to New Zealand for the company, but only on two occasions bettered 90 days on her outward passage. *The Lyttelton Times* of 27 April 1874, reporting on the ship on her arrival on her maiden voyage when she took out 333 passengers, commented on her appearance and particularly her speed: 'Looking at the ship from a distance she has a splendid spring from fore to aft, but the mainmast is placed somewhat too far aft which reduces her speed'. The account goes on to say that the saloon was elegantly furnished, the cabins commodious and capable of holding three persons; they were exceedingly well finished, the timber being of teak and birdseye maple with gilt mouldings, and fitted with every requisite. Below, 'the galleys are certainly the best that we have seen on any vessel, everything of the greatest neatness and the places being well ventilated'. Besides due consideration being given to the hygienic qualities of the accommodation, care was also apparently given to the personal condition of the passengers during the voyage. Objections to this interference are evinced by a petition, signed by 98 passengers, on 20 September 1878, against the compulsory sale of yellow soap at one shilling per bar, before *Rakaia* set sail from Plymouth!

Rakaia achieved her best land to land voyage, of 78 days, when Captain John Bone took her out to Auckland in 1881. According to *The New Zealand Herald* of the time, she brought out 'a large number of passengers, a considerable proportion of whom come with well-lined pockets'. Some of her cargo is also mentioned with a note of some of its values: clothing and textiles £10,000; straw hats £430; 1,240 gallons of brandy; 2,210 gallons of British spirit; six tons of candles. The total value came to £30,000.

Captain Bone was one of the most notable of the company's early masters, making no less than 52 voyages to New Zealand in sail and steam (at that time a record), and finally retiring in 1924 from the position of the company's first Marine Superintendent in New Zealand, after 50 years service with the company. Admiral Lord Jellicoe as Governor-General attended the farewell luncheon given in his honour aboard *Remuera*. The Prime Minister, W F Massey, in proposing the toast of the guest of honour, said he had travelled to New Zealand 54 years previously aboard a ship in which Captain Bone was serving as an apprentice. He had known him ever since and came to regard him as one of his most intimate friends.

The extent to which a speedy passage in the days of sail was due to the experience of the navigator is suggested by an incident on the outward voyage to Wellington in 1880 when Mr Hamon, the second mate, was making his first voyage to New Zealand. Coming through the Cook Strait, approaching Wellington Heads with extra caution, he kept too far to sea; a north-westerly gale sprang up, and, although the lighthouse could be seen, the *Rakaia* did not enter the Heads till three weeks later!

Rakaia was sold in 1892 at a time when several of the sailing ships were being disposed of; she was bought by J N Rodbertus, of Barth, Germany, and renamed *Marie*. In 1906 she was sunk but refloated, and, passing five years later to the ownership of Revere Co. and registered in Barbados, she was again named *Rakaia*. By 1916 her owners had altered her name to *Ruth Stark*, and, changing hands yet again in 1918, she became *Monte Carlo* under the French flag. By 1919 she finally disappeared from Lloyd's, after a recorded career of nearly 50 years.

This extract was taken from "The Sailing Ships of The New Zealand Shipping Company 1873-1900" – written by Alan Bott in 1972 – and reproduced with his kind permission. The painting of Rakaia is a watercolour by J Forster, and the original is in the possession of Alan Bott.