



The Fun Ship



If you drive along the road that runs along the Welsh side of the River Dee estuary you will come across an unusual sight. There, seemingly parked in a field, is an ocean liner. The Duke of Lancaster is a true Welsh Oddity, though it didn't start off like that. In fact it had links with the other corners of the United Kingdom. Constructed by the Harland and Wolfe shipyard, this 4,500 ton steam turbine ship was launched in 1956 and started its intended work as a ferry between Heysham, in Lancashire, and Belfast for rail passengers. It was nothing like the modern ferries. It had a first class lounge with silver service restaurants for up to 400. None of those famous British Rail sandwiches, matured till the corners rolled up, were on offer. Those were to be found offered to the 1400 passengers on the second class decks. It was decked out so well that it was often taken off regular duties for cruises around the Scottish Islands, or even more exotic destinations such as Denmark, Norway Spain and even Belgium, leaving the humdrum to her sister ships.

All good things come to an end. In 1970 she was converted to being a vehicle ferry, with a door at the blunt end, and main deck modified to accommodate cars and trucks. She still crossed the Irish Sea, between Holyhead and Dun Loaghaire, but by the end of the decade she was obsolete and outmoded. At the end of 1978 the ship was to be found tied up at Barrow-in-Furness.

Here she was discovered by a company called Empirewise, based in Liverpool. At that time Britain had stricter trading and gambling rules, and the company saw an opportunity to get around them; namely put them aboard a ship. The Dee estuary has a number of streams running down from the Welsh hills which open out into small harbours (and I do mean small). One of these is at Llanerch-y-Mor, between Greenfield and Mostyn docks. Delyn Borough Council was approached with plans for a leisure complex on board the ship, and they provided some financial assistance for the project. At a suitable high tide the ship was beached there - literally in retrospect. In order to protect the ship from tides, weather and currents it was planned to fill in the harbour around the ship. Unfortunately British Rail, who had sold the ship, denied the new owners access for construction traffic over the rail bridge between the road and the ship. This was a portent of what was to happen. Anyway, new plans were drawn up and sand from the estuary was dredged up and used to secure and protect the ship - as I said, it was beached retrospectively.

The leisure complex, now known as The Fun Ship, did come to fruition, with trading stalls on the main deck (open on a Sunday!!), bars and restaurants, and a gambling den on the higher levels with all the latest slot machines and so on.

It was popular. One year it was rated number 3 on the list of attractions to visit in Wales, based on the number of visitors.

It was then that the local council started to backtrack. They refused bar licenses, denied the company tourist signage, and made demands about fire escapes. They then refused an expansion of trading onto the car parking area, while allowing similar ventures, and demanded that owners charge an entrance fee under the guise of protecting other local traders. The council even held up a grant from the

Welsh Development Agency which would have improved the neighbouring sea defences. A number of Enforcement Notices prevented any development of the complex. Though the owners fought these with the support of the Secretary of State for Wales and won, the local council still pursued a campaign against the ship. By granting permission for a local market in Holywell town they could claim that as the Fun Ship was within six miles it was in direct competition of that market, and would have to close until a high court case (and you can imagine how long that takes and the costs involved) settled the matter. The Fun Ship became the No Fun Ship in 2004.

But it is still there, as a bit of a white (or rusty white) elephant, being one of the few steam turbine ships left in the world. You can go and view it close up, even though footpath access is under a railway bridge where you need to duck, along a footpath with much prickly and tickly flora, and being behind razor wire. If you do visit, it is almost a certainty that there will be others there too. After tourist traps like HMS Belfast and the Cutty Sark in London, or HMS Victory in Portsmouth, this must be one of the most photographed ships in Britain. Its situation is perhaps unique, and it is a perfectly proportioned handsome vessel.

Since the summer of 2012 the ship is being transformed into the U.K.'s largest outdoor art gallery, as you can see from the stamp issue. Masterminded by an art collective called Dudug, British and European artists have been invited to spray paint giant, surreal murals on the hull. One side has been completed and work has commenced on the other side. Included is a portrait of the ship's first captain John 'Jack' Irwin positioned by the bridge. These artworks, up to three deck heights in size, are large enough to be seen over half a mile away. Like them, or hate them, you cannot be unimpressed by their scale. These stamps show the starboard side of the ship (wooo I caught the nautical bug) as it is in the summer of 2014. They are produced in order to help promote the gallery's continued existence.