

# LAUNCH OF RMS ST HELENA

by Trevor W. Hearl

“I name this ship St Helena”. Prince Andrew’s clear voice rang round the old Hall Russell shipyard at Aberdeen, champagne splashed across the ship’s bows and the towering grey, blue and white hull began - after a breath-taking pause - to slide gracefully into the waiting water with cheers resounding from hundreds of spectators. As she swung slowly around, gleaming in the soft autumnal sunshine, tears of emotion moistened many an eye, for it had been a memorable and moving occasion.

The ceremony had started early in the afternoon of 31 October 1989 to the sound of music from the Regimental Band of the 1st Battalion, The Gordon Highlanders. Scores of guests gathered on the launch platform, including students and officials from St Helena as, well as representatives of every Island interest in the United Kingdom, while shipyard workers began knocking away the wooden supports that held the huge hull, seemingly precariously, in check. Meanwhile, HRH the Duke of York had arrived, deputising for the Duchess, to be welcomed at the shipyard by Aberdeen’s Lord Lieutenant. The Prince mounted the platform wearing a fine floral buttonhole presented by little Emma Isaac, who then proudly joined the royal party while the Ship’s Blessing was given by Rev. Dr Stewart Todd.

After the launch, Prince Andrew walked over to talk with shipyard workers and their families for whom the building of the RMS St Helena had meant so much. For they had gone through anxious times with the decline of the century-old ship-builders Hall Russell, before the order for the completion of the St Helena under the management of A. & P. Appledore Ltd., had revived the yard’s fortunes. Fitting-out and sea trials will take some months, of course, before the new RMS can go into South Atlantic service.

When, at a splendid Scottish reception afterward, the St Helena guests met their ship-builder hosts, the speeches and toasts, as well as the talk, focused not surprisingly on the Island and its ships. Prince Andrew, responding to a toast proposed by Mr. Jim Nielsen, chairman of A & P Appledore (International) Ltd, recalled his St Helena visit in 1984 with great affection as “the two best days of the many I have spent in the South Atlantic”. Spicing his short speech with witty asides relished by his audience, he recognized that St Helena governors and ships did not always get long well together - an allusion not lost in that company - so he had felt some unease that afternoon as he waited to launch the St Helena, fearing, he said, that “it might slip quietly away while Dr Todd was still pronouncing his blessing”.

In thanking Prince Andrew for honouring the Island by launching its ship, His Excellency Mr. Robert Stimson spoke feelingly of St Helenians’ affection for the Royal Family. The Island had taken Prince Andrew especially to its heart and were proud that its splendid new High School bore his name. For this “very precious

ship” the Governor wished particularly to thank Her Majesty’s Government and the shipbuilders who, despite difficulties and anxieties, saw it successfully launched on time. Stressing its vital importance to “some 6,000 British people” isolated in the South Atlantic, Mr. Stimson eagerly looked forward to seeing the new RMS “lying in James’ Bay [...] an extension of our Island community”.

Mrs Stimson then presented His Royal Highness with a St Helena lace tablecloth and a Prince Andrew School tie “as a small token of appreciation from the people of St Helena”.

Responding to the toast, “The Shipbuilders”, Mr. Alistair Lambie, managing director of A & P Appledore (Aberdeen) Ltd., spoke of their pride in building this new Royal Mailship for Britain’s South Atlantic communities. It had also brought particular satisfaction to those engaged in its construction for ensuring the future of their historic shipyard. Thus it was of unique significance for both communities.

Prince Andrew examined a model of the ship with some of the officials present and also took the opportunity informally to meet several St Helenian guests. But nothing could show his interest and pleasure better, perhaps, than the fact that His Royal Highness stayed much longer than planned. Superlatives abounded as guests bade farewell. Scotland had made it a truly memorable, and momentous, occasion for St Helena.

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