

Why "Shell"? - The Birth Of Shell Tankers

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The following describes how Shell Tankers started and how they were named.

In May 1892 Mr. Marcus Samuel a 39 year old Alderman of the City of London was a partner with his brother Sam in a business established by their father. At that time the brothers main trade was in sea shells and had nothing at all to do with oil. Nevertheless Marcus had commissioned and now part owned the ship that was to become the first Shell Oil Tanker.

When the family business M. Samuel & Co. was taken over by Marcus and Sam it was doing quite well as over the years their father had made numerous connections in the Far East. He had established a network of agents to trade rice, grains, sugar, semi-precious stones and exotic sea shells. The shells were very popular in Britain and in London their father employed about 40 girls in making shell-boxes - souvenir trinket boxes decorated all over with shells and embellished with mottoes such as "A Gift from Brighton". These boxes were very popular at the time both as a memento for a visit to the sea-side and as a means of feeling vaguely in touch with foreign lands that the majority of people would never see.

The business would never have made them very rich but they were comfortably off as, in 1878 when young Marcus was 25, he and Sam inherited £2,500 from their father's estate, a sum that was equivalent to £100,000 in 1991. They could have continued in the same manner and made a safe, steady income but in the middle of the 1880's Marcus junior had an idea. For some time the Samuel brothers had added case-oil to their Far East trade. Case oil was normally kerosene in rectangular tin cans containing 5 US gallons and normally packed two cans to a wooden case. This was a handy size for small shops or the public to handle. Kerosene became increasingly used for lighting as it gave a good bright light with minimal smoke compared to the alternatives of candles, lard, oil soaked rags etc. During the late 1880's the Samuel's met a marine engineer Fortescue Flannery, and over a period of time Marcus developed the idea that along with their Japanese firm Samuel Samuel & Co. the brothers should get into the Far Eastern oil market on their own account and to use their own ships to carry their own Kerosene. The main drawback with this idea was that as soon as Standard Oil, the virtual monopoly supplier, found out they would use their monopoly production within the USA and their vast profits to undercut any competitor anywhere in the world and then destroy or absorb them. The risk was great but if a secure source of oil could be found, say from Russia which was the biggest producer outwith the USA and independent from Standard Oil, and if the oil could be carried in bulk it would be significantly cheaper than case oil. They would also require storage tanks at their major ports, inland distribution centres and a sufficient number of ships to ensure a continuous supply of oil to their customers.

Another major problem had to be overcome. The Suez Canal Co. did not then permit the transport of case oil through the canal on the grounds of safety.

They had to be won over, otherwise any bulk oil from Russia would have to pass around the Cape of Good Hope which would reduce the savings due to bulk transport to a minimal level.

The Samuels' network of Far East agents already existed and finance for the new enterprise was raised from the Paris House of Rothschild. Marcus, Sam and Fred Lane, a ship-broker of the agency Lane & MacAndrew, sorted out a contract for oil from the Caspian Sea port of Baku, to be taken overland to the Black Sea port of Batum. All this infrastructure had to be put in place without bringing it to the attention of Standard Oil so that when the brothers started trading, Standard Oil would be taken as much as possible by surprise.

Fortescue Flannery designed the ships to take oil from Batum onwards and this was no easy task as he had to try and divine the minds of the Suez Canal Co. They had often said that for going through the Canal, the designs of Standard Oil's tankers were unacceptably outdated, but they never said what design would be acceptable. To put the position in context, the first steam driven, ocean going tanker, dedicated to carrying oil in bulk was the ss GLUKAUF which was built on the Tyne for a German company in 1886; and there were approximately 60 - 80 tankers in use in the whole world. The MUREX was Flannery's personal triumph, to counter the risk of grounding in the canal, he gave her water ballast tanks, which could be de-ballasted to lighten her if required. To counter the risk of collision, which could have ruptured her five oil tanks, he placed these amidships, with a coffer-dam, an empty space, at each end. This isolated the tanks from the boiler room and engine room aft, as well as from the fore hold and empty fore peak forward. Coal bunkers were located both sides of the boiler room close to where they would be needed. To allow for the expansion of the oil as the vessel sailed from the relatively cold Black Sea to the rather warmer Far East, there were expansion tanks built into the top of each tank. To reduce the oil's sideways movement, which could seriously endanger the ship's stability (as recently demonstrated by the Herald of Free Enterprise), an oil tight bulkhead ran fore-and-aft through the centre of each tank limiting the free

surface effect. Loading and discharge was exclusively by pumps; lighting was exclusively by electricity; and a device was arranged to steam clean the tanks thoroughly after discharge, so that no potentially explosive residue would be left. A modern tanker is still designed in basically the same manner. By a curious coincidence the Canal Co. issued new regulations for bulk oil tankers on 5th January 1892, stipulating requirements that were uncannily close to those of Flannery's design! Mark Abrahams, a nephew of the Samuel's, negotiated and oversaw the construction of storage tanks in Singapore, at Freshwater Island (now called Pulau Bukom and still one of Shell's largest refineries), in Bangkok, Hong Kong, Djakarta, Penang, Saigon, Shanghai and the Japanese port of Kobe. This was a difficult job as everywhere people were worried about fire risks, laws restricting the use of tankers, and dealers scenting rivalry and hence trying to hinder his plans. The worst was probably the interference from head office in London, who kept up a constant stream messages asking why he was taking so long! The Samuel brothers had an atlas in the office but never seemed to grasp that ½ inch on the map was 150 miles on the ground, in the sea or, worse still, in the jungle.

By 26th July 1892 the MUREX was completed and under Captain John R Coundon, set sail for Batum in the Black Sea. There she loaded a full cargo of Russian Kerosene and on 24th August 1892 she passed through the Suez Canal, the first bulk oil tanker to do so.

The first four ships built were MUREX, CONCH, TURBO and CLAM. Shell vessels since that time, when built specifically for the company's national deep sea fleets have all been named for the Latin names of shells. All Shell ships had an illuminated display case, usually in the dining saloon, which housed an example of the shell that the vessel was named after on show. In a few cases the shell was so rare that a very accurate glass replica was made, usually from an original example kept in the shell museum in Shell Centre in London. On the 18th October 1897, the Samuels changed the name of their company to THE SHELL TRANSPORT & TRADING CO. On the 1st January 1907 the Shell Transport and Trading Co. amalgamated with the Royal Dutch Petroleum Co. to become the Royal Dutch Shell Group of companies.

A few years ago, the Captain of a Shell Tanker passing through the Pentland Firth suffered a heart attack and was landed at Scrabster and treated at the Dunbar General Hospital, Thurso. During his convalescence he was shown something of Caithness including John O'Groats. He collected Groatie Buckies and said that he would recommend to Shell that one of their ships should bear that name. He was too late; as noted above, one of the first Shell Tankers was called "Conch".

A full history of the Shell Fleet was published in 1992 to commemorate its centenary in the book "Sea Shell: The Story of Shell's British Tanker Fleets, 1892 - 1992. By Stephen Howarth, and published by Thomas Reed Publications.