



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

2017 marks 50 years since QE2 was launched on the Clyde on 20 September 1967. The launch also answered a question that had been on the minds of many...

When Her Majesty The Queen (then Princess Elizabeth) accompanied her Mother to the launch of Queen Elizabeth in 1938 the world knew that the biggest liner in the world was to be called Queen Elizabeth - great secrecy had surrounded the name of Queen Mary until the very moment of her launch in 1934

When Her Majesty named Queen Elizabeth in Southampton in 2010 the world knew what name she was to give that ship. Just as everyone knew the name of the new aircraft carrier The Queen named a few years ago.

But when Her Majesty travelled to Clydebank on 20 September 1967 to name the new Cunarder it was a different story...

There was considerable public and press interest in the likely name of Q4 (how the ship was referred to throughout her gestation period and build prior to her launch) from the moment the contract was signed. There was pressure from Cunard's New York office for a 'Queen' name, while the favourite in the UK – at least in the early days – was Princess Anne.

In January 1966 the Daily Mirror columnist, Cassandra, wrote:

“The next question for romanticists such as myself is to speculate on what they are going to call the new maritime giant, which is known simply as No.736 [the shipyard number]. I predict that there will be enormous pressure to christen the new Cunarder a Queen. But which queen?

“We are short of reigning queens in English history. The Normans, the Plantagenets, the Tudors, the Stuarts, the Hanoverians, the Saxe-Coburgs and the Windsors have only produced half-a-dozen in the past thousand years.

“Two Marys, two Elizabeths, one Anne and one Victoria. Queen Anne was a colourless nobody and Queen Victoria was a colourful somebody.

“So RMS Queen Victoria is a distinct possibility for that dumpy little old lady was a real character who ruled for sixty-four years at the height of British imperial wealth and power.

“The Americans who will be the main clients for the ship would, I am sure, settle for RMS Winston Churchill. They are very fond of that old Anglo-American party.

“My own suggestion doesn’t stand a hope in high water. It is that the new ship be called John Brown. A fine solid British name that any commoner should be proud of.

“Nobody would know which John Brown. The chap who founded the firm that will build the ship. The whisky drinking Scottish ghillie who for nineteen years dominated Queen Victoria. The John Brown whose soul goes marching on. John Brown the celebrated Northumberland poet. John Brown who wrote the famous Dictionary of the Bible. John Brown the celebrated Edinburgh theologian of any of the thirty eight John Browns who are listed in the London telephone directory.

“It would provide endless argument as to which John Brown was meant that would rage in every bar in the country, including the bars onboard RMS John Brown.

“I just want to be helpful”.

Immediately before the launch more than 15,000 bets had been placed with the bookmakers and a Glasgow bookmaker was offering the following odds:

3 – 1	Sir Winston Churchill
4 – 1	Prince of Wales
	Prince Charles
	Princess Margaret
5 – 1	Britannia
6 – 1	Princess Anne
	John F Kennedy
8 – 1	Queen Victoria
10 – 1	Aquitania
12 – 1	Mauretania
14 – 1	Queen Elizabeth II
	Prince Philip
	Atlantic Princess
25 – 1	Clyde Princess
	British Princess

Other suggestions included Queen of the United States, Great Britain, Ocean Queen, The Crown and Anchor, Rose of England, Twiggy, The New Elizabethan, Gloriana, Windsor Wave and Donald Campbell (he had been killed a few weeks earlier).

Housewife Helen Gormley suggested 'Helen Gormley'.

Over 400 names were put forward with the last suggestion, Francis Chichester, arriving in just 48 hours before the naming.

But one name which was not suggested was Queen Elizabeth 2.

Sir Basil Smallpeice, Cunard Chairman, maintained silence on the issue save to say in July 1966, in an apparent rejection of a 'Queen' name:

“We shall have to find a name which will reflect this modern age and not recall the days of Henry Hall's band”

He claimed his intention was to resolve himself into a “committee of one” to choose the name, and preferably this would not be done until just before the launch.

In the event the final selection of three names was decided in May 1967 by Sir Basil and his Deputy Ronald Senior. Sir Basil later confirmed that the three names were Queen Elizabeth, Princess Margaret and Princess Anne. The final name was chosen by the same two men on Monday 18 September 1967 – just two days before the launch on Wednesday 20 September by Her Majesty The Queen. Once this was done, a message was sent to the Queen's private secretary, Sir Michael Adeane, at Balmoral – so at that stage only four people knew. The secret was kept to the very end.

A sealed envelope simply containing the name was sent to Cunard's New York office on the first flight on 19 September. It was to be placed in a safe and only opened if the scheduled live broadcast of the launch to the States somehow failed. The envelope would be retrieved and opened and the New York office would be able to announce the name.

Public speculation continued, and Princess Margaret became the 4 – 1 favourite on the eve of the launch when it was announced at the last minute that she would attend the ceremony. The yard workers had a different view and chalked 'Princess Anne' on the hull – allegedly Captain Warwick's (the ship's Master Designate) preferred name.

But Cunard's chosen name was not Princess Margaret or Princess Anne, it was not even Queen Elizabeth II, let alone Queen Elizabeth 2.

It was simply Queen Elizabeth.

One reason may have been that no British merchant ship had ever been named after a reigning monarch and the company did not wish to presume an exception.

But another reason of considerable weight concerned the sensibility of the Scottish people, whose ship this indubitably was. Cunard had built over 100 ships on the Clyde in the preceding century. The company knew full well that in Scotland the present Queen is not Queen Elizabeth II - she is simply Queen Elizabeth. To ignore such an historical fact would be resented – and, in any case, there was no need to do so as Cunard’s wish to have the ship named after the Queen was perfectly well served by the chosen ‘Queen Elizabeth’.

When the Queen proceeded at the launch ceremony to name the ship ‘Queen Elizabeth the Second’ - not just ‘Elizabeth’, nor even ‘Elizabeth Two’ – the fleeting look of consternation on Sir Basil’s face was obvious to the millions of television viewers tuned in to the historic event.

But it is difficult to know if it was a look of surprised delight that the Queen had, of her own choosing, decided to ignore tradition and to confer her name on Cunard’s ship – a merchant ship. That would have been a singular honour from the Monarch. Or, conversely, if it was a look of concern deriving from a knowledge of what complication would ensue. Probably a bit of both.

As soon as the Queen had surprised everyone, including Sir Basil, controversy began.

In England the name was criticised as being unimaginative, but in Scotland it was damned as “insulting”, “provocative” and “disgraceful”.

Arthur Donaldson, chairman of the Scottish Nationalist Party, said:

“It could not be a bigger insult to the people of Scotland”.

More than 500 calls were made to the various offices of Cunard in the UK, most of which congratulated the company on the choice.

Later on the evening on 20 September in New York the staff remembered about the envelope. Despite knowing the name they opened the envelope and it contained two words: Queen Elizabeth. So if the link had failed the New York office would have announced the wrong name.

In his autobiography Sir Basil maintained that he “could hardly contain” his delight when the Queen conferred her name in full on the ship. But despite this being clearly her wish he says he proposed the use of the Arabic ‘2’ as it would not have been appropriate to use the “official designation of the Queen as sovereign” – that is, Roman Numerals – in advertising.

Cunard caused even more confusion by issuing a release on 1 February 1968 saying that the Arabic 2 rather than the Roman II was chosen “for clarity at a distance” on the stern of the ship:

“The name of the new 58,000 ton Cunarder will appear on the ship as Queen Elizabeth 2 – not Queen Elizabeth II

“This decision, like other decisions about the design of the ship, was taken for sound practical reasons

“As with motorway signs, for clarity at a distance it was necessary to use block lettering for the name on the bow and stern of the ship. Roman numerals cannot all be successfully represented with block lettering – in particular the Roman figure ‘II’ can only be represented by a repeated Arabic numeral 1 and then unfortunately appears as a figure 11.

“The decision has the advantages of being in keeping with modern design trends (Roman numerals are disappearing even from such traditional manifestations as clock faces, and the fly leaves of books), and the popular contraction of the ship’s name is much more legible and attractive as QE2 than QEII”

Clarity at a distance it may have been, but as far as clarity for the public was concerned there was little; QE2 was often wrongly referred to as QEII throughout her long career.

Conversely today people wrongly refer to the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge at Dartford, the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre in London and the Queen Elizabeth II Terminal in Southampton as the QE2 Bridge, the QE2 Conference Centre and the QE2 Terminal.

Years later when asked why all the secrecy, Sir Basil said:

“It just seemed rather fun. People seemed to having a marvellous time trying to work out what it would be called. We decided to let them carry on. We were anxious to continue our tradition of royal names for our ships. I did not, by the way, have a bet with the bookmaker”.

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