

RMS MAJESTIC TO HMS CALEDONIA: THE “MAGIC STICK’S” THIRD LIFE

©2004-present, by Mark Chirnside.

Note: This article was first published in the *Titanic* International Society’s *Voyage* 2008: Volume 66: Pages 88-95. This online version is presented with some additional illustrations and material.

Despite her relatively short lifespan, *Majestic* – the White Star Line’s largest liner – experienced life under three names. As she was launched, she was known as *Bismarck* – Albert Ballin’s largest liner to date and the largest in the world, ready to lead the German merchant marine; following the war, she was ceded to Britain and became White Star’s (and, subsequently, Cunard White Star’s) *Majestic*; and in the summer of 1936, she was given several years’ reprieve from the scrappers, becoming the Royal Navy training ship *Caledonia*. Her service in that capacity should have taken her right through to 1941, if not longer, but the fire of September 1939 caused extensive damage and led to her ultimate destruction at the hands of the scrappers in the early 1940s. Her steel was useful for Britain’s war effort, as

Mark Chirnside's Reception Room



Note: There are a number of [hyperlinks](#) embedded within this article, which guide the reader to photographs and images of *Majestic's* conversion to *Caledonia*, and her final configuration. It should be noted that in order to display them online, many of the images have been reduced in size so that they will not take too long to load. However, even with that reduction some of the images might take a little long to appear, and the reader's patience is appreciated.



Above left: The distinctive crest of His Majesty's Ship Caledonia. (Courtesy Jim Duckworth.)

Left: Majestic's profile changed radically when she was converted into a training ship. In particular, the funnels and masts were reduced in height. Seen here in the late spring and summer of 1937, Caledonia soon settled into her new role. (Courtesy Jim Duckworth.)

her birth nation— Germany – edged closer and closer to defeat.

It is worthwhile taking a glance at her service as *Caledonia*, for it is an often neglected aspect of her history. After her withdrawal from the Atlantic run in February 1936, by June 1936 she had been sold for scrapping to Thomas Ward's. Before the end of August 1936, however, she was transferred to the Admiralty, as Cunard White Star waived the contractual clause that she had to be broken up immediately.

On August 27th 1936, Messrs. J. I. Thornycroft & Co., Ltd. were instructed that the conversion work 'is to be taken in hand as early as possible after the 31st August, so as to be complete in all respects...and enable the vessel to be delivered to Rosyth by you by the end of February, 1937, certain. It is *essential* [original *emphasis*] that the ship should be at Rosyth by that date, whether the work is complete or not, and the Admiralty trust that you will make every endeavour to complete the whole of the work accordingly.' In the end, it took somewhat longer. Work began on September 2nd 1936 and she did not leave Southampton until April 8th 1937.

Caledonia would be completed on a strict budget. The government specified: 'It is essential that the amount of work performed should be strictly limited to that which is necessary to

RMS Majestic to HMS Caledonia...



Above left: An advertisement for John I. Thornycroft and Co., Limited; the company was proud of its work in carrying out the conversion, and noted that Caledonia was 'still the third largest in size afloat'. (Courtesy Jim Duckworth.)

Above right: Another advertisement from Thornycroft's, which highlighted the company's diverse activities. Taken on one of the original passenger decks, the photograph shows a bath apparently still in its original location, even though the interior bulkheads have been removed and other fittings taken away. The remnants of the plumbing are visible. (Courtesy Jim Duckworth.)

adapt the ship for her new service. In carrying out the modifications special care is to be taken to minimise the extent of the alterations to existing arrangements, and to utilise as far as possible existing fittings.' Nor was her new service anything but a temporary reprieve: 'It is to be distinctly understood that as the services of the ship are required for a limited number of years only, the work of repairs and renovations (painting, etc.) is to be kept strictly to the minimum, and only such items as are necessary to bring the parts of the ship required for habitation or use into an efficient condition are to be undertaken. Painting is to be limited in amount to that required for preservation purposes and cleanliness.'

For all the attempts at cost-cutting, the conversion and subsequent work ran over estimates.

Mark Chirnside's Reception Room

The initial, bare estimate of £150,000 rose to a cost of £472,000, including £326,000 spent in 1936-37. All in all, the net cost of the conversion came to precisely £472,058. Although the original intention was to use *Caledonia* for two to three years, after the conversion work was completed the Admiralty came to believe that she might be suitable for ten years' service. Under that timescale, it would have taken her to 1948. What one official described as 'shortening the chimneys,' cost £2,450. Given the height of the ship's funnels and masts, it was necessary for them to be cut down and shortened to enable her to pass under the Forth Bridge on the way to Rosyth.

Perhaps too much money had been saved during the ship's regular overhauls, as the depression worsened in the early 1930s, for the 'ship's hull and fittings on opening up were found to be in a more unsatisfactory state than expected and substantial unanticipated expense arose in repairing, modifying, renovating, painting, etc. to bring the vessel up to the required standard.' Additional areas on E and F decks were fitted for her new role, but they had not been included in the cost estimates: civilian washrooms, a tailor's shop and fitting room, printing room, band mess room and instrument room, two Chapels, recreation areas and storage spaces. Hand rails were fitted throughout the length of the open decks, while new ladders and platforms were provided. Alarmingly:

During the progress of the work the pipe systems opened up so badly that extensive renewals of innumerable parts were necessary. A similar state of decay was found throughout on other machinery equipment and such expensive items as the complete renewal of tubes in the auxiliary condensers, cylinders and barrels for pumps and large repairs of bunkers and boilers were necessary. The bulk of the expenditure on machinery was in respect of equipment which is now in daily use under auxiliary steam.'

The propelling machinery had required considerable attention: 'the blading of all the turbo [*sic*: turbine] rotors, for example, required extensive repair, the auxiliary condensers required to be wholly retubed and the very extensive pipe systems required in many cases complete renewal. Of the forty-two [*sic*] boilers, eight only were required to be used by the Admiralty, but of these eight 15 percent of the boiler tubes required renewal.'

She left Southampton for the final time on April 8th 1937 for Rosyth, where she would serve as His Majesty's Ship *Caledonia*. The transformation was extraordinary. An observer at the time discussed the conversion, writing:

First of all, the general layout was planned; that is to say hospital wards, classrooms, sleeping spaces, bathrooms and wash places were mapped out, and a start was made on the work of stripping out all unwanted fittings. Those who only know the ship as she is today would get a considerable shock if they could see what they now know to be orderly classrooms, the spic and span hospital or large shower baths, littered with electric wires and plumbers' fittings, with

RMS Majestic to HMS Caledonia...

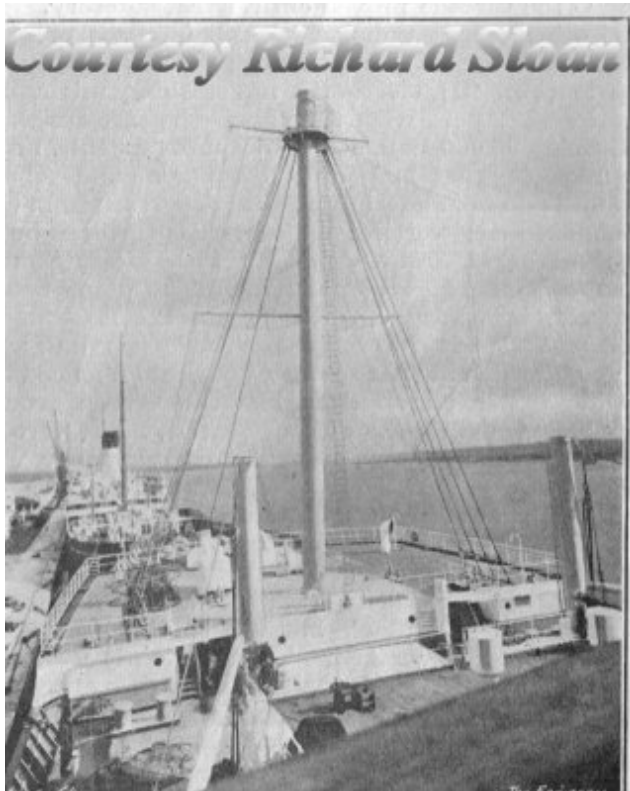
broken decks and scarred paint. Indeed, it was difficult to believe that order would ever come out of the chaos which greeted you on all sides, but with over 2,000 men working from 7 o'clock in the morning until 8 o'clock at night, every day of the week, the task was accomplished in eight months.

Difficulties and handicaps of all descriptions had to be overcome; having planned a bank of classrooms it would be discovered when the space was cleared, that solid steel structures blocked the way and could not be removed. Where bathrooms or washplaces had been planned, difficulty arose over getting the water supply to that place or the drainage away from it. Trade in the South of England was flourishing at that time and the services of draughtsmen and joiners were practically impossible to obtain, with the result that work got out of step with the planning. But despite these difficulties, the ship left Southampton under her own steam on April 8th 1937, under the command of Captain J. W. Binks, who had commanded such fine ships as the *Olympic*. The trip up the North Sea was without incident and the weather was fine for the whole journey. After the hustle and bustle of the previous six months everything appeared remarkably silent. On arrival in the Firth of Forth, on Saturday 10th of April, the ship was anchored below Inchkeith and waited until the state of the tide was suitable for her to proceed up the estuary, pass under the Forth Bridge and be locked in the basin. For this operation she was assisted by seven tugs from Hull and Grangemouth. This last part of the proceedings required skill and judgement on the part of the officers responsible. With her great length and beam it was a delicate operation, only possible at the most favourable state of the tide. All went well however, and the ship finally secured alongside her new permanent berth and the work of connecting up all the necessary services from the shore went ahead without delay.

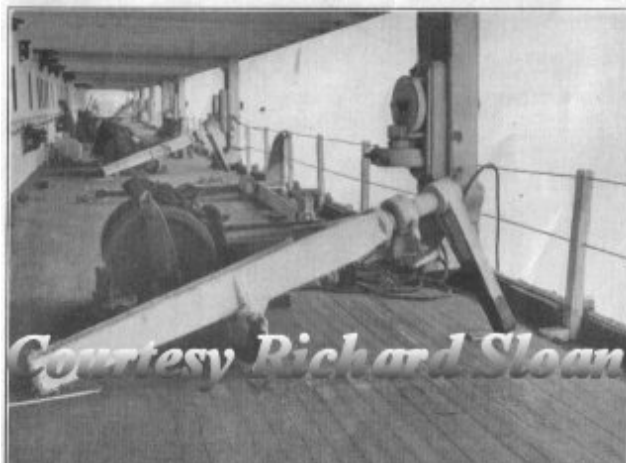
As she is now, the ship has accommodation for 100 Officers, 180 Chief and Petty Officers, a Ship's Company of 300, 1,500 Boys and 500 Artificer Apprentices. The ship is entirely self-contained as far as the domestic services are concerned, i.e., heat, light, power and hot water are all generated onboard and fresh water is led into the ship direct from the shore supply.

The food for the whole ship's company and for the boys is cooked in one central galley with all store rooms, preparing rooms, issuing rooms and offices in the immediate vicinity. The efficiency of the department, which is always considered one of the most important in the Navy, is greatly increased by this arrangement. Many might pause and consider for a moment the amount of work and organisation required in order to produce hot and appetising meals for 2,500 people exactly to time. On either side of this galley are the main dining halls for the boys and the apprentices. On the fore side, the old first class dining saloon now seats 1,200 boys at one time, at tables and stools of the same pattern as any

Mark Chirnside's Reception Room

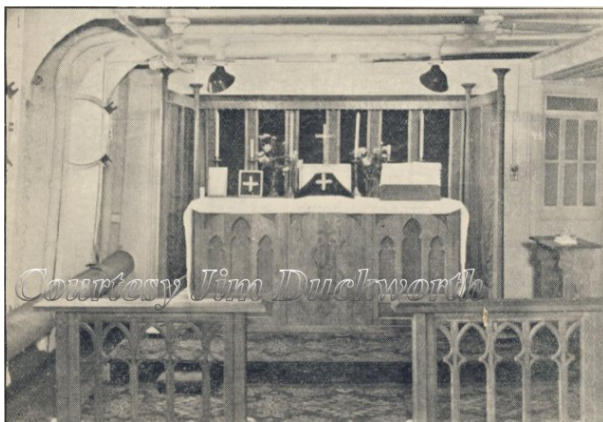
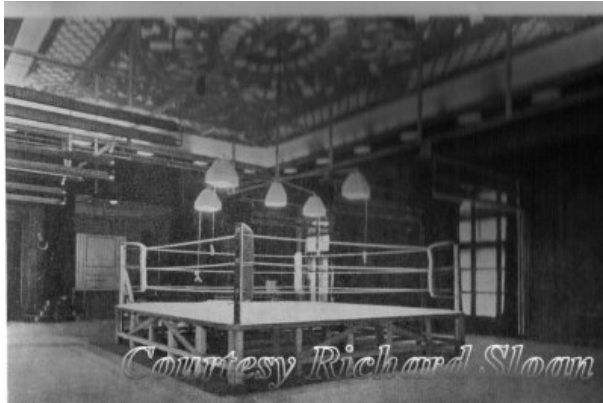


Top left: Berthed at Southampton, the White Star liner Laurentic can be seen ahead of Caledonia's bow. (Courtesy Richard Sloan.) Top right: A thirty-two foot cutter on A-deck's aft starboard side. (Courtesy Richard Sloan.) Above right: A completed Morse signal classroom situated on B-deck... (Courtesy Richard Sloan.) Right: ...and a gunnery classroom on the same deck level. (Courtesy Richard Sloan.)



Left: Work proceeds on A-deck, where the original lifeboats have been removed. (Courtesy Richard Sloan.)

RMS Majestic to HMS Caledonia...



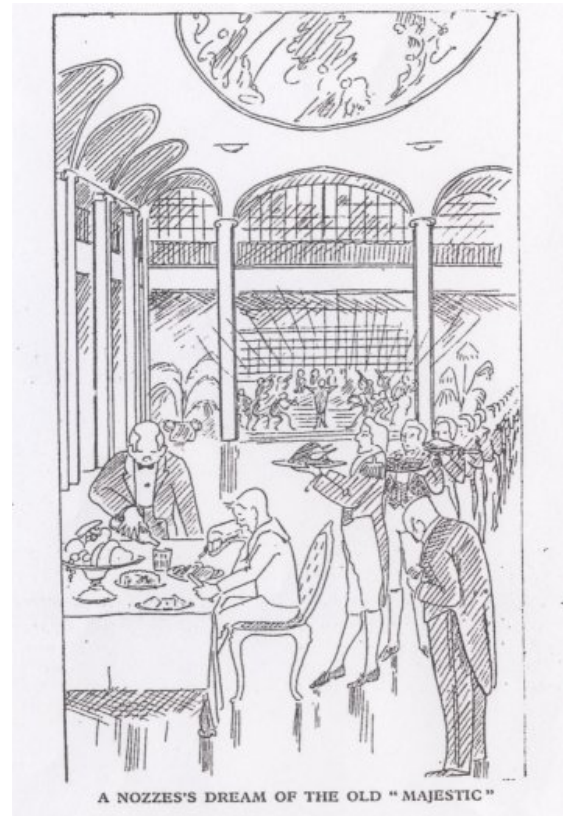
Top left: The first class lounge looked dramatically different following the conversion. Although the ceiling and other original fixtures and fittings remained, the luxurious furniture had all been removed. We can see the boxing ring in this unique image. (Courtesy Richard Sloan.) Top right: Caledonia's hospital had a large number of beds available. (Courtesy Richard Sloan.) Above left: The small Roman Catholic Chapel, photographed in 1937. (Courtesy Jim Duckworth.) Above right: The first class swimming pool as it was in 1937. (Courtesy Jim Duckworth.)

broadside mess of a man-of-war, but they may still gaze upwards at the country scene, painted on the domed ceiling, which no doubt many transatlantic passengers have admired on the after side, the old second class dining saloon accommodates 500 Artificer Apprentices in the same way.

The sick quarters, containing eight wards, are fully equipped to deal with cases of injury and disease, including infectious cases.

There are a modern X-ray department, an operating theatre fitted with the latest equipment and anaesthetic apparatus, a laboratory, and a massage and electrical treatment centre.

Mark Chirnside's Reception Room



Top left: Majestic's first class dining saloon as it appeared in the 1920s... (Courtesy Jim Duckworth.) Above left: ...and as in its final configuration as Caledonia's seaman boys' mess. She carried over 16,000 first class passengers in 1923 alone, most of whom would have dined here rather than in the more exclusive a la carte restaurant. The original tables that thousands of first class passengers used over the years have been removed, yet the original ceiling and other features remained as a reminder of the ship's glory. Unfortunately, it appears that these fittings were destroyed during the fire of September 1939. (Courtesy Jim Duckworth.) Above right: A cartoon from December 1937 depicts the original dining saloon, which contrasted with the ship's new role. (Courtesy Jim Duckworth.)

The staff of four Medical Officers includes a Surgical Specialist...'

Majestic's spacious first class public rooms underwent significant changes when she was converted to *Caledonia*, as the areas were utilised for training and other purposes.

What was the first class lounge has been converted into a small but very popular gymnasium, where church services are held on Sundays and where concerts, lectures and, it is hoped, cinema shows will be given.

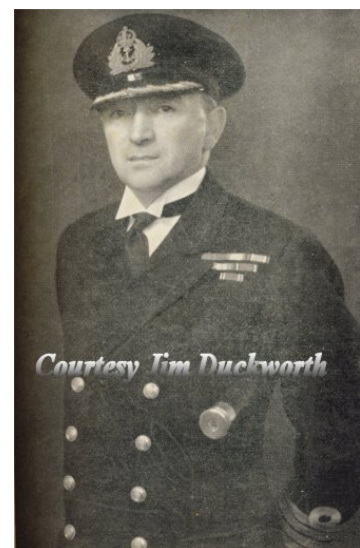
RMS Majestic to HMS Caledonia...

The first class palm court serves as a general recreation room with a well-stocked canteen at one end, together with ping-pong tables, a wireless receiver and pictures of general interest. The swimming bath is still used as such, and those boys who can swim pass their swimming test in a duck suit, and those who cannot swim at all are given instruction in this necessary art. The other services in the ship which have to receive consideration are, to mention a few, the clothing issue room where every new recruit receives his first suit of navy blue and from whence replenishments are made as required; the tailor's shop where a staff works hard at fitting new kits and dealing with repairs; a boot repairer's shop which is kept continuously busy; the barber's shop; and the laundry and drying rooms where each boy learns to do his own washing. For recreation there are rugby, soccer, cricket and hockey pitches, the number of which will be doubled in the near future. Fixtures are obtained in all these games with local schools and clubs with a similar standard of play. A .22 rifle range is a popular place to spend an hour or two and there are competitions and prizes to be won by the best shots.'

His Majesty's Ship *Caledonia* was officially commissioned on St George's Day, April 23rd 1937. The following month, the first Seamen Boys came onboard; in July 1937, 'a contingent of Boys lined the streets of Edinburgh' and 'marched past Their Majesties the King and Queen at the Palace of Holyroodhouse.' As the first year of *Caledonia's* service passed, the number of boys onboard increased rapidly.

HMS <i>Caledonia</i>	May 1937	June 12th 1937	July 10th 1937	August 7th 1937	October 2nd 1937	April 1st 1938
Boys	35	163	309	388	833	1,643

In December 1937, the first Volume and Issue of *The Caledonia Magazine* was published. Although that title was given on the inside, the cover bore the words: *The Journal of HMS Caledonia*, Volume 1, Number 1. Captain Lake wrote a Foreword, taking a look at the circumstances at that time and the reasons behind *Majestic's* conversion to *Caledonia*:



Right: *Caledonia's* Captain Sir Atwell Lake, B.T., O.B.E. This photograph was published in April 1939. (Courtesy Jim Duckworth.)

Mark Chirnside's Reception Room

Time	Activity
0500	Call the Hands.
0500-0600	Lash up and stow hammocks, wash, dress, and a snack of cocoa and a ship's biscuit.
0600-0700	Scrub decks (barefoot) Holy stone (on hands and knees) Squee-gee dry. Polish all brass.
0700-0800	Breakfast. Clean into dress of the day.
0800-1200	Divisions, prayers and colours. This was followed by three sessions of instruction, school, seamanship, gunnery, etc. "Standeasy" was within this period and consisted of a cup of tea and a doughnut.
1200-1300	Hands to dinner, usually a three course meal of soup, main course, and a sweet.
1300-1600	Games and sport on the playing fields of Rosyth. Each boy was issued with a pair of white shorts and a white jersey for the English or a blue one for the Scottish. Daily orders listed the type of game, who was in which team and which strip to be worn. Whether one knew the laws of a particular game or not, one soon learnt.
1600-1630	Tea. Bread with jam, marmalade or syrup. Change into night clothing, which included a pair of comfortable, brown canvas shoes with leather toe-caps.
1630-1900	Evening quarters and evening instruction.
1900-2100	Supper followed by recreation time. During this time, boys had to take a shower and change into pyjamas for "short arm" inspection before turning in.
2100	Lightsout [sic] and pipedown.

Above: Lieutenant J. Wilson recalled the daily routine onboard during 1938 and 1939, when he was training. Presumably, the routine remained similar right through from 1937 to the end of Caledonia's service.¹

RMS Majestic to HMS Caledonia...

‘For many years Great Britain pursued a policy of disarmament in the hope that the other great nations of the world would follow her example. This they did not do, and in consequence it became vital for the Government to launch a rearmament programme.

‘This was done, not with any bellicose or warlike intent, but purely as a defensive measure and in order that our Empire should be in a position to resist aggression.

‘As far as the Navy was concerned, this rearmament meant increasing the strength of our fleets, whereby we would be better enabled to fulfil our duties of protecting our shores, of guarding the ocean highways, and of ensuring the free and safe passage of our seaborne trade within the Empire.

‘This increase in material meant a corresponding increase in personnel. The training establishments in the south had not the accommodation for the increased numbers required, and so the Admiralty decided once again to establish a training ship at Rosyth.

‘Thus, after a lapse of 30 years, there is once more one of His Majesty’s Ships bearing the honoured name of Caledonia stationed in the Forth.

‘It can be said in all truth and sincerity that peace is the most earnest desire of our nation, and a strong and united Britain is the greatest factor in the world today contributing to that end. The very existence of our Empire is dependent upon the Royal Navy, and it thus becomes our duty so to train Caledonia’s boys that they will join the fleet as Seamen second to none, and prove themselves, in peace or war, to be worthy upholders of the great traditions of our Service.’

The Editorial told *Caledonia*’s trainees: ‘we wish you to realise that this is your magazine, the record of what you do, say and think. By your individual efforts you can make it brighter and better. Let us have more sketches, drawings and original articles and don’t be shy about blossoming out as an author or an artist.’ Even seventy years later, some of *Caledonia*’s ‘old boys’ retained copies – a source of fond

Right: Rear-Admiral E. C. O. Thomson, C.B., D.S.O., Commanding Officer of the Coast of Scotland. Caledonia’s port bow is visible behind him. (Courtesy Jim Duckworth.)



Mark Chirnside's Reception Room



Above left: Caledonia's magnificent profile can be seen in the background during rowing practise. (Courtesy Jim Duckworth.) Above right: Caledonia's Grenville Division pose alongside the ship's towering side. (Courtesy Jim Duckworth.)

memories as they retained pride at their time onboard, during the ship's brief two-and-a-half years' service as a training ship.

By April 1st 1938, *Caledonia's* complement included no fewer than 1,643 boys and 647 staff of all kinds, totalling 2,290 personnel. On war's outbreak, *Caledonia's* staff and boys were transferred to HMS *St George*, at the Isle of Man. *Caledonia* was a large target and, to make matters even worse, with her engines out of commission she could not be moved from Rosyth. Even towing her would have been extremely difficult.

Walter Braddock remembered the days prior to the war:

Saturday 2nd September was a tense day and shore leave was cancelled because no answer had been received to the ultimatum to Germany and there was

'APPS IN CALEDONIA'

By One of Them

Before the Great War, the old *Caledonia*, a boys' training ship, lay off Queensferry. For fifteen years she graced the Firth of Forth until finally the shipbreakers claimed her. Now, near where her predecessor lay, is another *Caledonia*, far more graceful than her forerunner. Her arrival has been West Fife's greatest nautical event since the German High Seas' Fleet surrendered.

I will endeavour to describe life aboard as an Artificer Apprentice sees it...

An article, published in 1937, describes life onboard HMS *Caledonia*: [Click here to read the entire article \(opens in browser\).](#)

RMS Majestic to HMS Caledonia...

apprehension that the Germans might try a surprise air or sea attack without war being declared. We worked ship as usual and were told to get all our kit together...

Sunday 3rd September was Sunday routine as usual, clean shop, breakfast, clean into number ones, divisions at 0900 hours followed by church. We knew there was going to be an announcement at 1100 hours over the radio so divisions and church were completed in rather less time than usual and we went to our mess decks and gathered near the tannoy speakers to hear the fateful broadcast by Mr. Chamberlain.

There was no cheering, but a lot of serious faces and a general air of relief that, at last, the uncertainty was over, few comments "well that's that" and "now we know" seemed to sum it up. I think we all wondered what was going to happen but no one was going to show that they were afraid. We didn't have much time for contemplation, for within a few minutes, the air raid sirens sounded and we went into our, long practiced, air raid drill, rapidly left the ship, fell in by divisions on the jetty and doubled off into the dockyard to our designated shelters in the underground passages around the dry-docks. It seems it was a false alarm or an exercise for after half-an-hour the "all clear" sounded and we trooped back onto the ship. Instructions came over the tannoy that we clean into number threes and overalls, go to dinner, and all-hand fall-in for work would be at 1330 hours. Dinner was the last cooked meal on the ship.

At 1315 hours we were detailed off into working parties to lift all moveable stores and kit out of the ship, onto the jetty, and into a number of dockyard lorries which then transported their loads across the dockyard to the railway sidings where, unknown to us, some days previously, three long trains of carriages and wagons had been drawn up. Into these went everything moveable...By 1830 hours, everything was loaded into the trains, there was a roll call muster by classes, then we entrained and away we went.

The last we saw of the ship was the view of her against the sunset sky as we went over the Forth Bridge heading south...'²

W. Douglas Hazell recalled: 'It is thought that she was to be converted into a troopship, but this was not to be. On 29th September, only a short time after she ceased to be a home for the Boy Seamen, she caught fire. It was thought the result of a blow-lamp burning in her paint shop. The fire was to render her useless for Royal Navy purposes.' Whether someone 'in the know' told Hazell, the question as to the cause of the fire has never been definitively answered. Certainly, at the time it was not attributed to any form of enemy action; another possibility, mooted by one newspaper, was that an electrical fault had been to blame.

Writing to the Treasury on November 3rd 1939, an official noted that *Caledonia's* future as a

OUR SISTER'S FATE

When Spring was breaking o'er our ship,
Leviathan made a last, long trip.
Here she will terminate her days -
The final parting of their ways.

But such is fate.

Side by side the pair were laid -
The Teutons built them and, when made,
They idled through war's four long years,
While o'er the world ran wet, salt tears.

But such is fate.

When strife at last came to an end,
Their fortunes took a diff'rent trend.
The *Vaterland* went o'er the sea;
The other came to this country.

But such is fate.

Together then they ploughed the foam,
Though each could boat a diff'rent home.
Majestic - largest ship afloat;
Leviathan - the New World's boat.

But such is fate.

Our craft gave place to larger ships,
To others now upon the slips;
To Scotia's shore one ploughed her way
To live, as '*Cal*,' another day.

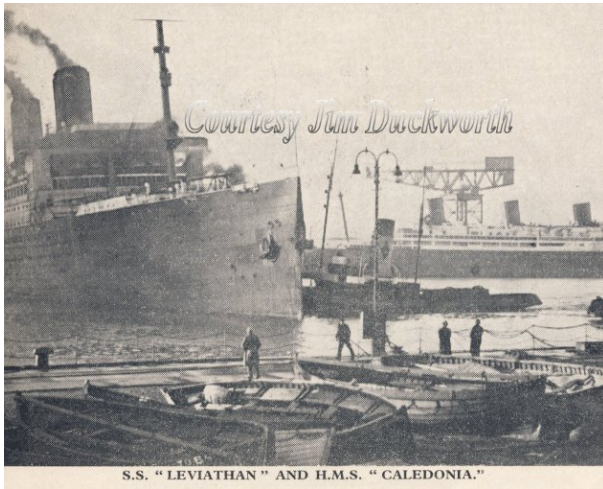
But such is fate.

When spring was breaking o'er our ship,
Our sister made a last, long trip.
Here she will terminate her days -
The final parting of their ways.

Our sister's fate.

R. D. Horn, Grenville [Division].

RMS Majestic to HMS Caledonia...



Left: Leviathan (left) arrives for scrapping in 1938. Although Majestic was the first of the three sisters to be withdrawn permanently from passenger service, by 1939 she was the only one that had not been scrapped. In March 1939, the Board of Trade concluded that she would never return to passenger service; she had served almost two years as Caledonia (right). (Courtesy Jim Duckworth.)

training ship had been in doubt.

Even before the recent fire the vulnerability of this huge ship had led to the conclusion that she was useless to us as a training establishment in time of war, and her possible use after the conclusion of hostilities had been seen to be entirely problematical. In consequence of the recent fire, which burnt her almost completely out, she is reduced to a hulk, and is now grounded on the Tancred Bank in the Firth of Forth. Repairs sufficient to equip her for any war or peacetime purpose would be extremely expensive.

He reminded them:

Under the terms of our agreement with Messrs. Ward, Shipbreakers, when the ship was purchased from them, this firm was to have the first option on the *Caledonia* after completion of Naval Service, and we have now received a letter from them asking to be allowed to make an offer for her. We think it would clearly be good business to sell her to Messrs. Ward if they are willing to pay a reasonable price for her...

By February 27th 1940, even selling the ship for scrapping was proving a troublesome proposal:

If the vessel were sold for breaking up it would be necessary to raise her and remove her to a breaking up yard. In view of the frequent visits of enemy aircraft to the Forth there would be a risk of the vessel being sunk in the fairway if she were moved, and the work of salvage would also occupy the attention of salvage personnel and equipment at a time when an urgent demand might arise for their services on more valuable work.