

Pacific Steam Navigation and Shaw Savill), Ben Line, T&J Harrison and Blue Star Line had all been family-run companies.

Some chose to list on the Stock Exchange while others stayed private, but with containerisation, many quit the shipping business in favour of less risk and better returns elsewhere. The capital costs associated with containerisation were a real deterrent.

Now though, we see liner shipping dominated by private companies. Maersk is listed, but seems to function as a private company; MSC and CMA CGM are private, as is Evergreen and, arguably, OOCL. Only Hapag Lloyd is a public company in the true sense – APL and the Chinese lines are state-controlled and the Americans have disappeared. The Japanese are structured much as they were, parts of massive conglomerates that are now ostensibly independent but still maintain strong corporate links with the other divisions, with the Korean carriers set up along similar lines.

Another phenomenon that has resurrected itself is the heavylift/breakbulk sector. Driven out of the market by cherry-picking container lines, the conventional liner operators were left with too much low-paying cargo to be viable. High stevedoring costs didn't help.

Now though, we are seeing a resurgence as shippers want to ship large items of cargo and the container lines, that could carry it if they wanted, decline to do so.

In the 1960s, every port had a floating crane that could load heavy cargo on to conventional ships and, subsequently, on containerships, but these have mostly disappeared. Beluga apart, this seems still to be a profitable business, with Rickmers-Linie and Chipolbrok among those flourishing.

In the early days, it was felt that India, South America and other lesser-developed regions such as West and East Africa would remain as breakbulk markets, but it wasn't to be. Shippers in these countries were disadvantaged if they couldn't deliver their cargo pilfer-free to the importer's doors; the infrastructure of these nations was slowly made container-friendly.



The EU has, of course, also had a major impact on shipping. Borders were swept away, leaving many forwarders with much less work. It's hard to remember the days when a truck from Italy to the UK needed not just masses of paperwork, but cigarettes to facilitate speedy border crossings. There was no anti-bribery legislation then.

The EU also helped speed the decline of UK west coast ports already hit by the decision of deepsea carriers to turn their services in the North Sea basin, calling at UK south and east coast ports. With increasing trade between the UK and the EU mainland, sidelining trade with former Commonwealth countries, ports such as Hull, Immingham and Felixstowe flourished, as did Dover.

But really there have been no fundamental changes over the past 40 years. Containerships still sail from port to port, servicing the needs of shippers reliably and punctually.

Liner shipping is still highly competitive, just as it was a century ago, and the forwarders continue in much the same way as they did when Mr Danzas decided it was a safer profession than fighting for Napoleon.

Despite the growth in air freight, shipping is still far and away the biggest carrier of cargo in volume/weight terms.

Plus ça change, plus ça même chose.

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