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Lake Victoria shipping, past, present and future.

Introduction

In October 2007 I was fortunate to have visited the Kenyan port of Kisumu on Lake Victoria for the purpose of surveying a vessel. The vessel concerned was a rail ferry which was built in Kisumu in 1965 for the purpose of transporting railway wagons between Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda across the lake, effectively creating an east African railway network.

I found the history of shipping on Lake Victoria to be fascinating, and I feel that after a long period of decline, there will be a revival of shipping on the lake, hence I wanted to put my thoughts down on paper for anybody who might be interested in this part of the world.

Background

East African countries saw quite some development towards the beginning of the 20th century. As far as Kenya was concerned, the railway system from Mombassa to Nairobi and on to Kisumu was completed around 1904. Along with this, Kisumu and Mombassa contained not just a railway depot, but also a port and a shipyard.

In Kisumu on Lake Victoria, the railway terminal, the port and the shipyard were effectively within one large development, and the original buildings remain today. The port was developed with stone quay walls and warehouses. The railway terminal included sidings and cranes. The shipyard had one graving dock and two slipways, plus all of the usual resources of a shipyard – a foundry / blacksmiths shop for producing hot rivets, a machine shop, plating shop, etc. It was effectively a reproduction of how a UK shipyard looked at that time bearing in mind that some large vessels such as the White Star liners Britannic and Titanic were about to be built in the UK using riveted steel plates and the technology that existed at that time.

Once the railway between Kisumu and Mombassa was completed, parts and materials were shipped into Kisumu to enable ships to be built there.

There is some discussion as to whether the ships were built completely in Kisumu, or were shipped in sections from the UK and assembled there or were built entirely in the UK, then cut into manageable parts, shipped to Kisumu and then rebuilt.

I think it was a combination of all three. The first ships to be built in Kisumu were cargo vessels like the Nyanza and her sister Usoga.

These vessels were completely riveted, and were powered by steam reciprocating engines and DC electrical power. The quality of the build was good, and both of these vessels are still in Kisumu after more than a hundred years.



Nyanza, built 1906, lying alongside the dock in Kisumu



Nyanza



Usogu, lying alongside the dock, but flooded and being broken up for scrap.

The Nyanza is still trading although her current owners are looking to re-engine her. The Usogu flooded some years ago and is now being broken up for scrap.

Shipbuiding took place throughout the 1900's with a variety of vessels being built at Kisumu including cargo ships, passenger ships and rail ferries.

Some of the last ships to be built there were in the 1960's before Kenya became independent.

Those vessels that remained on the lake at that time, were absorbed into the East African Railways network. This liaison between Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda continued until Amin came to power in Uganda the early 1970's. Shortly after, the alliance dissolved and each country took vessels out of the alliance and operated them for their own purposes.

Kenya Railways took the Nyanza, Uhuru, Kyaka (now Reli), Usoga, Alestes, Tilapia, Homa, Kavirondo and Kamongo.

Tanzania Railways took the Umoja (sister to Uhuru), Victoria, Nyangumi, Clarios

Uganda Railways have the Kaawa, Pamba and Barbus.

Most of these are still on the lake in one form or another.



Picture in the Kisumu dockyard showing the various ships built there.



Rail ferry Uhuru, 1965, currently being refurbished prior to re-entering service.



Kavirondo being lengthened on the slipway in Kisumu



Another lengthening project carried out by Lake Victoria Marine Services.





Various barges remain.







Reli, ex Kyaka, sitting between what was a dredger and a steam piling hammer.



Alestes and Tilapia at Kisumu.



The dockyard in Kisumu. Hippopotamuses regularly wander through the dockyard at night, feeding on the vegetation.

There have been some casualties over the years, and not all vessels built here remain afloat. The most well known casualty was the Bukoba owned by Tanzania Railways at the time, which capsized and sank in 1996. Hundreds of lives were lost mainly to the crocodiles. The Kabalega, with Uganda Railways also sank after a collision. Another Uganda Railways vessel the Barbus sank alongside and was recovered.

Current situation

At the present time, few vessels remain in service on the lake. The Victoria is being operated by Tanzania Marine Services. The Kamongo is still operating - as a cargo / livestock carrier. Lake Victoria Marine Services are restoring and lengthening two vessels, which will return to service soon.

The operation of the Uganda and Kenya railways has been taken over by Rift Valley Railways and this should see a return to service of some of the rail ferries in the near future, which will be good. At present, the Uhuru is being refurbished and will re-enter service soon. It is in remarkably good condition for a vessel of 42 years.

Future prospects

The future prospects for the rail ferries looks promising given that a non state owned company will be operating the vessels in the future, in connection with the railway network.

With some degree of political stability, there will be a lot of demand for freight and passenger services on the lake once again. Realistically, the only way in which vessels are going to be acquired to meet this demand, is to refurbish those that remain in reasonable condition.

I doubt we will ever see a return to the prolific shipbuilding which once took place in Kisumu, but it is certainly looking to become an interesting place for ship owners and insurers alike.

Simon Groves

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