



**A.KIRSTEN**

HAMBURG

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*Broker and Ship-owner*

HAMBURG

**H**amburg has always been known as a cosmopolitan city where the stranger from abroad has had a warm welcome from its hospitable citizens. The persecuted have sought asylum there, especially during the disturbed times of war, and foreign merchants have settled in Hamburg in order to continue their businesses or to establish branch offices. Amongst such foreigners representing British interests was John Marquis de Fontenay, the founder of the Kirsten firms.

John Fontenay came from one of the oldest and most illustrious French noble families, le Sage de Fontenay. Because of their Huguenot beliefs, various members of the



JOHN FONTENAY

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family emigrated and one went to North America, settling in Philadelphia. There, in 1769, John Fontenay was born. His mother, Mary Ralfs, was an English woman and his relations may have persuaded the young Fontenay to go to England. He completed his merchant training in the firm of Gee & Co., Hull, and, at the beginning of

French Revolution, went to Hamburg because trade and shipping in England were affected by the war with Napoleon.

Many well-known Englishmen already lived in the Hanseatic city. The Hamburg shipping, therefore, was very important, the trade being concerned mainly with British firms and British ships. Fontenay, being the bearer of a well-known and esteemed name, did not lack influential connections. He did not, however, use his title here; presumably his father had already dropped the title of Marquis in the United States.

In the year 1801, Fontenay obtained his Hamburg citizenship and, at the same time, was admitted as a shipbroker. The following year, he married the widow, Anna Katharina Kirsten, and, a little later, together with an Englishman, Thomas Goulton Hesleden, founded his commission shipbroking firm, Fontenay & Hesleden. This firm had its office at 112, Admiralitätstrasse, Hamburg, where

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also lived until he acquired new premises in Alsterniederung, near the Dammtor, during the 1820's. Up to the time of his death, he enlarged these premises considerably. By the terms of his Will, this estate was entailed in 1835, the conditions of which still exist to-day. John Fontenay himself had no children but was very much attached to his four step-children, three daughters and one son.

Heinrich Friedrich Kirsten learnt the shipbroking business in his step-father's firm, Fontenay & Hesleden, and, in April 1827, commenced business for his own account after he had been admitted as a shipbroker. During the same year, Fontenay's partner, Hesleden, died. Following his death, Fontenay reorganized his business and on the 22nd day of November 1827 established the firm of Kirsten & Company in order to benefit his step-son, making Heinrich Friedrich his junior partner. On the 1st July, 1830, Heinrich Friedrich became a full partner and the sole heir to the business, Fontenay having also willed his fortune to his step-children despite their own, not inconsiderable legacy from their father. His descendants are still benefitting from this legacy.

Heinrich Friedrich Kirsten was born in Hamburg on the 1st June, 1796. Since Fontenay's death on the 7th March, 1835, he was the sole owner of Kirsten & Company, which,

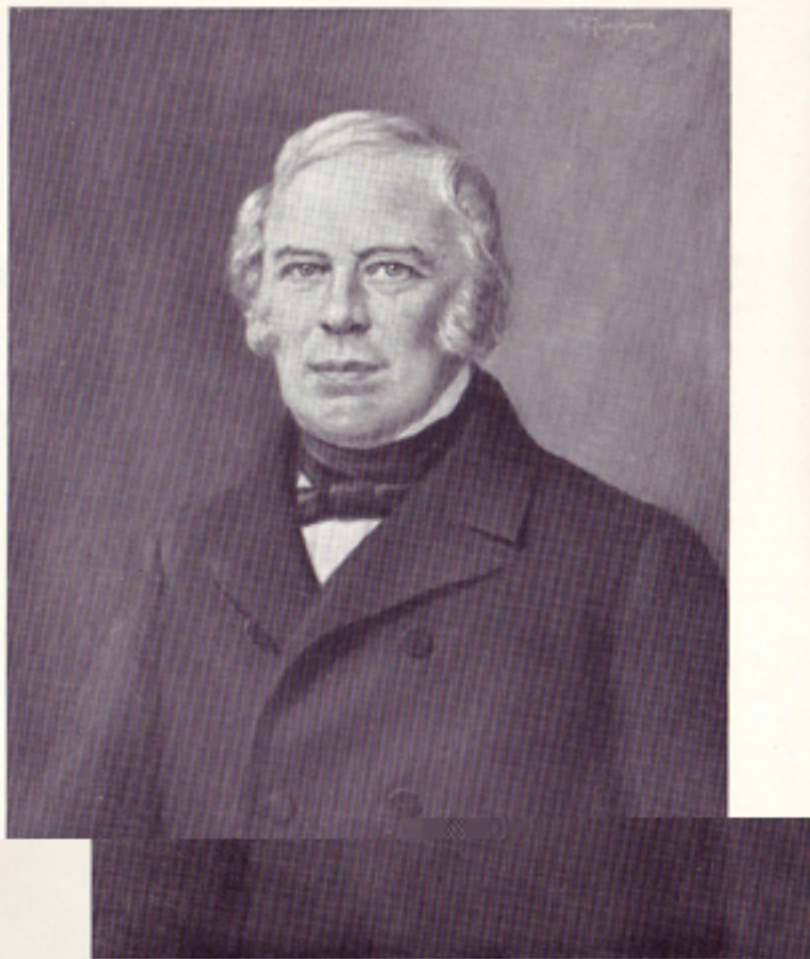


SS. "HELEN MC.GREGOR"

after a few years, he changed into H. F. Kirsten. Following tradition, he concerned himself mainly with the business of British shipping companies. He was entrusted with the agency of a number of British Companies which traded from London, Hull, Goole and Liverpool to Hamburg and in whose hands lay the overseas trade.

England, at that time, was the Power controlling the seas. London was the market-place as well as the warehouse and

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transhipment port for Colonial goods, whilst Hull handled manufactured goods. To the English, Hamburg appeared to be the ideal place from which to pass on the goods to the Continental hinterland. Technical achievements assisted the expansion of this trade. In 1815, the first ship appeared on the Hudson and, already in 1816, "THE LADY OF THE LAKE" sailed up the Elbe from England to Hamburg. Ten years later the steamship had obtained complete ascendancy over sailing vessels in the coasting trade.

It was not until the coming of the steamship that regular liner services were inaugurated. These were started according to the industrial needs of the time and the initiative of the shipowners. Local Hamburg shipowning companies also came into being.

In 1825, the General Steam Navigation Company commenced a line from London to Hamburg and gave their agency to the shipbroking firm of George Delaval. A little later when the firm of Gee & Co., for whom Fontenay had once come to Hamburg, started a line from Hull to Hamburg, they appointed H. F. Kirsten as their agent. Further companies followed when other lines were established and, in a very short time, H. F. Kirsten, as well as Delaval, was recognised as a leading broker in the trade with England. The

daily papers regularly displayed his advertisements in which he set out incoming and outgoing vessels.

In close relation with his English customers, H. F. Kirsten was eventually obliged to enlarge his business and to justify the faith which his business friends had in him. However, in spite of his good name and great financial strength, he stipulated that the firm should be liquidated after his death. He died, after a life-time of work and success, on the 12th September, 1866, but almost 30 years passed before the firm was finally wound up in accordance with his wishes.

Meantime a new firm had been established under the style of H. F. Kirsten. It was founded in 1876 by Heinrich Friedrich's son of the same name and dealt with the import of American meat products. In a very few years, this firm gained an important position in the economic life of Hamburg although it had nothing to do with the old shipbroking firm, H. F. Kirsten.

Heinrich Friedrich's son, Adolph, took over all business from the parent shipbroking firm. A few weeks after the death of his father, he founded a new shipbroking firm in his own name, A. Kirsten, to which the British firms, for whom his father had acted, transferred their interests. Under the new name, the broker business of H. F. Kirsten continued



S.S. "CORDELIA"

unchanged, for Adolph Kirsten also concerned himself mainly with the duties of a shipbroker, particularly in the trade with England.

In Hamburg, the shipbroking profession was under State supervision. The Hamburg Shipbrokers enjoyed official protection but they, in their turn, had to submit to definite regulations. Amongst these regulations was a rule which prohibited the owning of ships and, it was only for this reason, that

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shipbrokers in Hamburg did not get the sanction earlier as ship-owners. However, two years after Adolph Kirsten had founded his own firm, the restrictions on the shipbrokers' profession were rescinded and the road was opened for him, and for other enterprising brokers, to run a shipping company officially which, up to then, had been possible only in exceptional cases or under a covering name.

The earliest Kirsten vessel, run by Adolph's brother John Kirsten, was the wooden barque, "FONTENAY". She was built in the United States in 1864 and was bought in 1865. Unfortunately, she was lost on her first voyage under her new ownership. In the following year, she was replaced by a new barque, "JESSIE", the bottom of which vessel was copper-sheathed. Built in England, she was the only sailing ship owned by the firm A. Kirsten.

Adolph Kirsten had soon realised that the time of the sailing vessel was past and that the future belonged to the steamship. He had self-propelled vessels built with which he started his own service to London. Kirsten was an ardent admirer of Shakespeare and, therefore, took the names of his vessels mainly from the works of this poet, a tradition which his descendants have upheld to the present day.



ADOLPH KIRSTEN



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Due to his activities as a shipbroker, Adolph Kirsten was thoroughly conversant with trade requirements as well as with freight and passenger business. This knowledge gave him confidence to enter the shipowning business in addition to his shipbroking activities, but later, in 1878, he amalgamated his broker firm with his shipping line. In 1879, the first 1000 ton vessel, the "JESSICA" was launched. There followed, at short intervals, three further 1000 ton vessels, the "OPHELIA", the "VIOLA", and the "PORTIA". With these vessels, the Hamburg—London Line was founded in 1881 in the form of a shareholding company.

In the same year as the founding of his London Line, Adolph Kirsten succeeded in taking over another shareholding company with four vessels and, in this way, was able to prevent possible competition. During the next five years, his fleet was enlarged by five new vessels, bringing the total to thirteen. A. Kirsten was now ready to compete with the General Steam Navigation Company who had, up to now, had an undisputed field.

The mainstay of the Kirsten Line was the service to England where he had the best connections built up during the time he had been doing his shipbroking business exclusively.

Adolph Kirsten had taken over from his father, Heinrich



SS. "CELIA"

Friedrich Kirsten, the agency of Jos. Gee later to become Balley & Leetham Ltd., and then Ellerman-Wilson Line, which traded from Hull to Hamburg. In 1875, he was able to add the agency of the Hamburg—Newcastle Line, taken over from Pearson & Langnese which is the present day Tyne-Tees Shipping Co. The great expansion of industry and trade in all European countries and the proportionate increase in world demand for more tonnage greatly benefited A. Kirsten during the expansion of their shipping company.

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By this time, Kirsten's position as a shipowner was so well established that he could now also enter the overseas trade. He directed his attention to South America where he intended to compete with the Deutsche Dampfschiffahrts-Gesellschaft Kosmos in Hamburg. With the firm object of disputing their place in this trade, Adolph Kirsten formed the Hamburg-Pacific Dampfschiffs Line on the 13th April, 1886 with a service to Valparaiso/Chile operated with four new vessels, the "CORDELIA", the "BIANCA", the "LAVINIA" and the "VIRGILIA", each of 3000 tons. This line was known by the short title of the Kirsten Line. In the course of a very few years, the tonnage of this line was increased from four to thirteen vessels. With this fleet which covered the demands of the trade at the time, and in view of technical improvements in the ships, Adolph Kirsten could safely envisage a competitive war with the Kosmos Line. However, pressure of competitive freights was upsetting the expansion of both companies. In 1898, therefore, a fusion of the Kirsten and Kosmos Lines was made and the vessels of the Hamburg—Pacific Line passed into the possession of the Kosmos Line on whose Board of Directors, after an exchange of shares, Adolph Kirsten now played a decisive role similar



SS. "LAVINIA"

to that in his own former company. His firm, A. Kirsten, took over the broker business for the Kosmos Line and acted in this capacity until after the first World War.

The situation in the London service, the oldest service of the company, had been satisfactorily settled by reason of the amicable relations and personal friendship of Adolph Kirsten and Mr. White, the Chairman of the General Steam Navigation Company, which now assured the steady growth of

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this association. The agreement with the English Company permitted the taking out of an occasional vessel from the service for other purposes.

In this way, it was possible during the 1890's to expand in the European shipping area. A service to Rotterdam was instituted. Soon afterwards there followed another to Antwerp and to Amsterdam. When these short trades were suc-

cessfully established, the Kirsten Line commenced various services to the Baltic in order to obtain a share of the trade with Russia and the Scandinavian Countries.

Adolph Kirsten had started business with his first steamers in 1878; when in 1913 he looked back on a period of 35 years as a shipowner, his fleet comprised 29 steamers, 29 883 tons gross (43 812 tons capacity), all sailing under the Kirsten flag. These steamers served a network of lines which radiated from Hamburg, extending over the North Sea and the Baltic, and provided several sailings a week on each route in both directions.

In the same way as the shipowning company expanded so had the brokerage business increased. The successors to the firm of Gee & Co., in Hull, the Ellerman-Wilson Line, had reconfirmed Kirsten as their agents. New agencies were acquired in addition to the numerous agencies which inland and



O. KIRSTEN

E. THOST

A. P. KIRSTEN

foreign firms had given to the firm of A. Kirsten during the past century, the most important of these being that of the Deutsche Dampfschiffahrts-Gesellschaft Hansa in Bremen whose main interest lay in the service to India.

The acquisition of this agency was the result of a friendly agreement between both firms in consequence of which A. Kirsten gave up his own service to Calcutta which had only been built up a few years previously.

In 1919, the old liner services were soon taken up again. Since their own fleet had been reduced to six small vessels, Kirsten utilised, at first, chartered tonnage to maintain regular

services. The first new vessel, the "DESDEMONA", with a capacity of 2250 tons, was launched from the Reiherstiegwerft in Hamburg in 1920 and she was followed, a little later, by her sistership, "CLEOPATRA". By 1923, the company once more possessed sufficient tonnage to enable them to carry on the liner service without the aid of chartered vessels. The agreement with the General Steam Navigation Company had been renewed and, with this security, the expansion of the line could continue unimpaired by the efforts of new competitive lines in disputing Kirsten's position in the field of his activities.

The pride of the company was the new vessel, 1750 tons capacity, equipped with all modern technical improvements, whose keel was laid down in 1927 to celebrate the centenary of the Kirsten firm. On this important occasion it was decided to break away, for once, from the Shakespearean tradition and, in memory of the founder of the firm, to name this fine ship "ADOLPH KIRSTEN". During the years 1935—39, a new vessel was ordered annually from the Lübecker Maschinenbau-Gesellschaft, and, with 21 super-modern seaworthy



SS. "BIANCA"

ships, the number of vessels of 1914 was nearly approached, the total tonnage almost achieved.

During this time, the idea of a liner service to overseas was once again actively pursued. One member of the firm stayed in North America for some time in 1938 in order to investigate the possibilities, and to study local conditions thoroughly on the spot. The outbreak of war in 1939 interfered with these plans which had almost matured.





LAUNCH OF MS. "DESDEMONA"

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perpetuate names which have always been borne by vessels of the company. The first two new vessels built after 1914/18 War had been so named. When once more new vessels were christened "DESDEMONA" and "CLEOPATRA", history was repeated, thus confirming the company's faith in the achievements of their forebears and the will of the present generation to emulate their unceasing activity.

After these two motor freighters were put into service, sailings of the Hamburg-Chicago Line were increased and the service thus strengthened. Gyro-compass, automatic steering, Radar, radio and radio telephone place these vessels amongst the most modern and economic of their kind. The third sistership, the "OPHELIA", is to be despatched for Chicago during the coming season.

Apart from these motor freighters, each of 3100 tons capacity, two motor coasters, of 900 tons each, were built in 1950/51 for the service to Benelux ports and to London and further vessels were placed on order. After her completion, the "CELIA", 6650 tons capacity, will be on the berth for the winter service to Halifax and St. John and two vessels, each of 7500 tons capacity, will be used to increase the European services.



LOADING PLACE IN HAMBURG

The end is not yet written, for, with twelve modern vessels, the firm A. Kirsten enters their Jubilee Year of 1952 in which they can look back on 125 years as a private owned Shipping Company still in the hands of the 4th and 5th generation of the same-named family.