HOVERTRAVEL ** 28 YEARS **

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The Beginning

Isle of Wight based Hovertravel was formed on the 2nd May 1965 by Messrs John Britten and Desmond Norman (of Islander Aircraft fame), Mr Edwin Gifford and Mr Don Robertson. Together with their friends which included The Glen Mills Bank (now the Royal Bank of Scotland), they put up £60,000, to establish a permanent hovercraft service between Portsmouth and Ryde on the Isle of Wight. The amphibious nature of the hovercraft enabled Hovertravel to run over Ryde sands and land directly on the town's esplanade. Thus providing a faster and more convenient alternative to the traditional ferry service, which was operated by British Railways between Portsmouth Harbour and Ryde Pier Head. Indeed Hovertravel cut the Solent crossing time to under 10 minutes for the first time ever, a substantial saving on the ferry time of up to 40 minutes.

The hovercraft chosen to operate the service was the SRN 6 which could carry 38 passengers. Two of these craft were ordered under a lease-purchase agreement. The first (SRN 6 - 130) was handed over to Hovertravel on the morning of 25th July 1965 at Westland Aerospace's Saunders Roe works East Cowes. Initially Hovertravel operated 2 routes from Ryde, one to Southsea and the other to Stokes Bay, Gosport, and it was from the latter that the first passenger carrying trip was made just before mid-day on the 24th July 1965. The fare was set at 7s 6d a single journey before 1030 hours, and 10s 0d thereafter. This compared with British Rails fare of 4s 3d.

Hovertravel operated a single SRN 6 until 16th May 1966 when their second SRN 6 (026) entered service. It is worth mentioning that by the end of 1965 the company had carried 116,000 passengers with a single craft operation. The Ryde to Southsea route soon proved to be more popular than the Stokes Bay route, and by the end of the summer of 1967 the Stokes Bay service was closed down. In marked contrast the Ryde to Southsea route continued to increase in popularity, however on 29th October 1967 the Solent service was suspended for the winter due to heavy losses over the previous 2 winter seasons. The service was resumed in the following year on 1 April 1968, and to date there has never been an interruption to the company operations except for Christmas and Boxing Day of each year.

Hoverwork

In 1966, Hovertravel set up Hoverwork, a wholly owned subsidiary, to offer charter and crew training on a world-wide basis. The company was run by Mr Christopher Bland who subsequently took over as Chairman and Managing Director of the parent company, Hovertravel. Hoverwork were initially based at Dennis Yard, Cowes, close to the slipway that was later to become Cowes Hoverport. One of the first overseas ventures took place in 1967 when a route was operated at Montreal's "Expo '67" using an SRN 6

craft. This led to more charter work in the Northwest Territories, Canada with Hoverwork undertaking ice trials in Hudson Bay during the winter of 1967/68. Additionally a Hoverwork craft (026) was chartered by the Geographical Magazine to navigate the Amazon and Orinoco Rivers.

Larger Craft

By October 1968 Hovertravel had carried its 1,000,000th passenger on the Solent, and with the continued success of the service, Hovertravel looked for a larger craft to replace the SRN 6. This led to the design of the Vosper Thornycroft VT1 which was to have a capacity of 146 passengers and 10 cars. The VT1 was to be a semi amphibian, in that it was to be fitted with a full flexible skirt but driven by water screws, this meant that the craft would have to be berthed by nosing up to a shallow beach. VT1 001 commenced trials in 1969 using Hovertravel crews, and included demonstrations to Jersey for a proposed route between Jersey and Dinard.

Other routes under consideration were in Greece, Gibraltar, Tangier and a possible run between Bournemouth and Yarmouth on the Island, however the craft was unsuitable for the Ryde to Southsea route due to the extent of sands at Ryde where the craft would run the risk of grounding. Without any permanent routes for the craft the VT1 project was terminated. Crews were still supplied to the manufacturer for trials and subsequent delivery to Denmark via the Kiel Canal of Craft Nos 002 and 003.

Seismographic Surveys

In 1969, Hoverwork converted 2 SRN 6s to seismic survey operations, the first time such a conversion had taken place. The ensuing contract took place in the Waddenzee, Holland and proved to be so successful that during the next decade Hoverwork, in conjunction with many seismic companies completed numerous survey contracts throughout the world, particularly in areas within the Middle East.

Expansion

In 1974 Hovertravel assembled an SRN 6 Mk 1 at the company's premises at St Helens, this was Hovertravel's first stretched craft, and was based on the hull of a previous craft. The stretch added a 10 foot middle section increasing the seating capacity from 30 to 58. The craft entered service on the 11th August 1974 with the name 'Freedom'.

The 2nd May 1976 saw Hovertravel takeover the running of the Cowes to Southampton route from Seaspeed. Hovertravel operated the service under the new name of Solent Seaspeed. The 2 stretched SRN 6s were used on the route. Later that year Hovertravel also took over the International Hoverservices twice daily service carrying shipyard workers between Cowes and Vosper Thornycroft's yard in Woolston, Southampton, using a 60 seat SES vessel.

In May 1977 Hovertravel/Hoverwork's fleet stood at 10 craft, the most craft the company has ever owned. The fleet comprised of 3 stretched SRN 6s, one well deck SRN 6 Mk 5, 3 standard SRN 6s, one flat decked SRN 6, and 2 SRN 5s.

During 1979 Hovertravel experienced mounting opposition to its continued use of its noisy SRN 6 craft, particularly from residents in Gosport. Further pressure was applied in 1980 when planning permission for the terminals was renewed until the end of 1985 on condition that Hovertravel would not operate the SRN 6 after that year. This lead Hovertravel to seek a design for new quieter type of hovercraft which would supersede the SRN 6.

1980 saw the demise of the Cowes to Southampton service with the last crossing being made on 24th December 1980. The closure of the route was largely due to the lease on the Southampton terminal not being renewed and the fact that an amphibian was in direct competition with Red Funnels Hydrofoil on what was essentially a non-amphibious deep water route.

1980 also saw the commissioning of the AP1-88 design to supersede the SRN 6. This design was based on a welded aluminium construction which would make it considerably cheaper than the SRN 6 to buy and maintain, although much heavier than the previous craft. The current AP1-88 has an all up weight of slightly more than 40 tonnes (the same as a Boeing 737). The new design specified 4 diesel engines to power the craft, while incorporating the latest skirt technology developed from the SRN 4 Mk 3. The noise problem was to be solved by employing the air-cooled diesel engines to drive 2 fixed pitch propellers turning at relatively slow speeds within large lightweight ducts. The AP1-88 (advanced projects) development was funded by Hovertravel, British Hovercraft Corporation and the NRDC (National Research and Development Corporation).

In July 1981, construction of the first AP1-88 hull was commenced at Fairy Allday Marine, Gosport and in December of that year the hull was towed across the Solent to Hovertravel's yard at St Helens, for fitting out. A second AP1-88 also built at Gosport arrived at St Helens in April 1982.

The maiden flight of the first AP1-88/80 took place on 23rd July 1982, from the Hovertravel works, and following extensive trials the craft entered service on the Ryde to Southsea route on 8th March 1983. The first craft was named Tenacity by Sir Christopher Cockerell, and instantly proved popular with the travelling public. Fitted with 80 seats the craft provided new levels of comfort, whilst being able to maintain a service in sea conditions that would have suspended SRN 6 operations.

On 13th December 1981 Ryde terminal was severely damaged by storms, and beyond repair. A new terminal was built and opened in March 1983 which coincided with the introduction into service of the AP1-88.

The second AP1-88/80 named Resolution entered service on 30th June 1983, and for the meantime the SRN 6 was kept in reserve in case of teething troubles with the AP1-88s.

In 1984 Resolution started a long term charter to Textron Marine Systems, USA to be used for pilot training within the LCAC programme.

In May 1985, Hovertravels third AP1-88 was completed, entering service in June of that year. The craft name Perseverance was to coincide with the company's 20th Anniversary. A departure at 0745 hours from Southsea on 21st May 1985 marked the last time an SRN 6 was used on the Solent service.

Meanwhile, abroad in 1985 Hoverwork were carrying out what was to be the last seismic survey using an SRN 6 in Egypt. Towards the end of the contract the craft (022) made the first complete journey by hovercraft along the Suez Canal, travelling Northbound from Port Suez to Port Said, on route from The Red Sea to Abu Quir Bay just to the East of Alexandria in July.

In 1986, Hovertravels familiarity with the AP1-88 lead to the supply of pilots to operate a passenger service at Expo '86 in Vancouver, Canada, using BHC's AP1-88/100 demonstrator.

In late 1987 the charter of Resolution to Textron was turned into a sale, leaving Hovertravel with 2 AP1-88s, Tenacity and Perseverance.

Development Continues

October 1988 saw the purchase of a bare hull of an AP1-88 from BHC and work commenced on the larger 100 seat version at St Helens to prepare the craft for Solent Service. The stretched design was 3 metres longer than the AP1-88/80 prototype craft, and could provide seating for up to 100 passengers. It also had larger lift engines and larger bow thrusters, and an improved low pressure skirt design. This craft was to give the company the extra capacity it required as passenger numbers on the Solent continued to rise.

Whilst the AP1-88/100 (007) was being fitted out Hovertravel found themselves in a position of requiring a craft to replace Perseverance which was to be sold to Textron Marine Systems to work along side Resolution in America. This was achieved by the purchase of an AP1-88 from Australia. This craft was built under licence by NQEA and had been used on routes within Port Phillip Bay, Melbourne. The 84 seat craft Courier entered service with Hovertravel in January 1989, the first time an AP1-88/100 had been used on the Solent service.

On the last day of May 1989 a milestone in Hovertravels history was reached with the carriage of the 10,000,000 passenger on the Solent. Shortly afterwards the AP1-88/100 (007) was completed and entered service in June. The craft was named Double-0-Seven after its hull build number. Initially the craft was fitted out with 92 seats (although this has now been increased to 98). Now the company had 2 AP1-88/100s operating on the Solent for the first time, however this was short lived as in July 1989 Courier was sold to a Spanish company to operate between Benidorm and Ibiza. To replace the craft Hovertravel bought the last remaining hull from BHC and like the others the craft was fitted

out at St Helens and entered service on the 1st June 1990, having been named Freedom 90. Since then Double-O-Seven has continued to run along side Freedom operating a 15 minute schedule at peak times, which has released Tenacity for potential charter work.

Operation in Africa

During 1990 Hoverwork was awarded a contract to run a passenger service in Sierra Leone, West Africa, using Tenacity. The craft was refitted for the charter and shipped to Sierra Leone, in the Autumn of 1990, starting operations there in December of that year. The charterers (Provincial Air Services) used the craft to transport airline passengers between Lungi International Airport and Freetown, across the mouth of the Sierra Leone River. Unfortunately the Gulf War and later a coup d'etat dissuaded tourists and made the continued operation unprofitable for the charterer, and so in 1992 the operation came to an end. Tenacity was returned to the UK in September 1992 and after its present refurbishment will be available for charter once again.

Terminal Facilities Improved

1990 also saw the building of a large car park on reclaimed land at Ryde Esplanade, and in conjunction with this work the landing pad at Ryde terminal was substantially enlarged.

During the winter of 1990/91 a new passenger terminal was built at Southsea, this was opened on the 23rd March 1991. The high profile building has provided far superior facilities and is more than double the size of the previous structure.

AP1.88 Sold

In the Mediterranean Courier had been laid up at Gibraltar Airport since 1991, after completing its operations in Spain, and was shipped to St Helens to be refurbished by Hoverwork.

The craft was put up for sale, but as she had not been sold by the summer of 1993 Hovertravel was able to use the vessel as a standby for its solent route, and in fact at times of peak demand during the summer Hovertravel had 3 AP1-88s running at the same time to provide extra capacity. It is also worth noting that a fourth AP1-88 was also operating in the Solent at that time, the craft having been fitted out at St Helens for a customer in Northern Russia, and was undergoing sea trials and crew training with Hoverwork.

Concluding Remarks

Since the first day of operation when 800 passengers made the crossing between the Isle of Wight and Portsmouth the number have steadily increased with the grand total now standing at over .... With 28 years of experience of cross Solent travel, Hovertravel has proved itself as the longest established commercial hovercraft operator in the world.