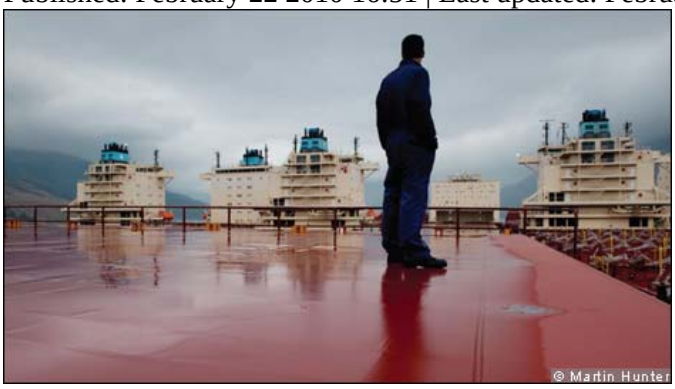
World's fastest container ships mothballed

Published: February 22 2010 16:51 | Last updated: February 22 2010 16:51



Cargo ships in Loch Striven - Only 10 crew will be employed to maintain the ships in Loch Striven, against the 120 who would have been needed to keep it at sea

Near the waterline inside the Maersk Beaumont lies the main reason why this new container ship is set to spend at least the rest of this year unused on a Scottish sea loch.

Twelve cylinders, whose linings alone weigh eight tonnes each, sit ready to accelerate the ship to speeds of nearly 30 knots (55kph). They make the Beaumont and her six sister ships, built to rush Chinese goods to the US east coast, the world's fastest modern container vessels. But fuel consumption is nearly as high as on the world's largest container ships, which carry three times as much cargo.

The fast ships, which analysts say would have cost well over $50m (€36.7m, £32.3m) each, have fallen victim to a doubling in fuel prices, slumping demand for containerised goods and changes in industry practice.

Denmark's Maersk Line, owner of the vessels, moved the Beaumont and four of the sister ships to Loch Striven, off western Scotland's Clyde estuary, in July. Another redundant Maersk ship was added to provide more stability when the group was lashed together. The remaining two B Class ships, as they are known, are laid up at Laem Chabang in Thailand.

The ships are among hundreds laid up worldwide to see out the worst downturn in container shipping's 53-year history. AXS Alphaliner, a Paris-based consultancy, estimates that 10.1 per cent of worldwide container ship capacity is currently idle after a 10 per cent slump in container movements last year.

However, the B Class's fate is the starkest illustration of the change in the industry's fortunes. Although the oldest is only four years old, conditions have changed so completely they may never see commercial service again without heavy modifications.

David Johnstone, captain of the group of laid-up ships, says he feels sad to see them taken out of use – particularly because he was first captain of the oldest ship, the Maersk Boston, on its launch in February 2006. "They were going to be the fastest – it was an honour," he says.

The crisis is hitting seafarers harder than ships, he points out. Only 10 crew will ultimately be needed to maintain the six laid-up ships in Loch Striven, against the 120 or so who would have been needed to keep them at sea.

"It's bad enough the ships being laid up," Captain Johnstone says, as the current crew steadily dismantle and clean key components in preparation for mothballing. "Closer to home, there are people getting paid off."

Behind the B Class ships' construction lay a core assumption about the long boom in container shipping between 2001 and 2008. As trade growth accelerated following China's accession to the

World Trade Organisation, container lines sold their services on their speed, arguing that the faster service allowed customers to hold fewer Chinese toys and electrical appliances in stock.
That strategy has been upended by the worldwide economic slump of the past 18 months. Falling demand and significant ship deliveries mean most shipping lines now have spare capacity. Ships' bunker fuel now costs arabout $450 a tonne, compared with $200 a tonne in 2004, when the B Class ships were planned.
These developments mean it makes more economic sense to slow ships down, add spare ships to services and conserve fuel than to focus on speed. Average speeds, once well above 20 knots, are now falling to about 14 knots. Customers seem not to mind if deliveries remain reliable and cheap.
Tony Greener, UK technical manager for Maersk's container shipping division, says the company has found slower speeds commercially successful. "It's making us think, 'Is the future slow speed?' " he says.
Yet slow speed is no answer for the B Class ships as they stand. Their narrow, yacht-like hulls are suited only to high-speed operation. "You can't run them at conventional speeds – they're fairly inefficient," Mr Greener says.
Maersk is considering modifying the vessels, possibly by shortening them, to suit them to the new, lower-speed environment. The US navy could also convert them into supply ships.
In the meantime, Maersk has found a temporary, if bizarre, use for them – hosting a children's TV adventure game show. ***(FinancialTimes.com 22/02/2010)***

➔ Traduction (partielle)

Les porte-conteneurs les plus rapides du monde mis sous cocon

C'est au niveau de la flottaison, à l'intérieur du Maersk Beaumont, que réside la principale raison qui fait que ce porte-conteneur va probablement passer le reste de l'année sans naviguer, au fond d'un fjord écossais.
Douze cylindres sont prêts à propulser le navire à près de 30 nœuds. Le Maersk Beaumont et ses six sister-ships, construits pour acheminer les marchandises chinoises jusqu'à la côte est des Etats-Unis, sont les plus rapides et les plus modernes des navires de ce type.
Ces géants, qui ont coûté 50 millions de dollars chacun, sont tombés victimes du doublement du prix du fuel, de la chute de la demande en transport de conteneurs, et dans l'évolution des pratiques industrielles.
Maersk a mis le Beaumont et quatre de ses sister-ships au fond du loch Striven, sur la côte ouest de l'Ecosse, près de l'estuaire de la Clyde, en juillet (2009). Un sixième navire a rejoint le site pour stabiliser l'amarrage de l'ensemble. Les deux derniers bâtiments du type sont en attente en Thaïlande, à Laem Chabang.
Des centaines de navires sont ainsi en « réserve » de par le monde, dans l'attente d'une sortie de la pire crise qu'ait connu le transport par conteneurs depuis 53 ans.
Le cas des porte-conteneurs de la série B de Maersk (dont le Beaumont) est toutefois différent, ils ne pourront probablement pas reprendre la mer sans de profondes modifications.
(…) Il y a effectivement un lien entre la logique qui a conduit à la mise en service des porte-conteneurs du type B (le grand boom de la conteneurisation entre 2001 et 2008) et le modèle économique en vigueur : au plus vite les jouets et autres appareils électroniques étaient acheminées de Chine vers le reste du monde, au moins les stocks devaient être importants. L'effondrement de l'économie depuis 18 mois a fait que de nombreux armateurs disposent de capacités excédentaires. Et le combustible a plus que doublé. Il devient dés lors plus économique de ralentir les bateaux, d'ajouter d'autres bâtiments et d'économiser le fuel, plutôt que de se focaliser sur la vitesse. La vitesse moyenne est aujourd'hui de 14 nœuds, alors qu'elle dépassait les 20 nœuds il y a peu. Pour le consommateur final peu importe, dés lors que les marchandises sont là au moment voulu, et au plus bas prix. (...) L'avenir est-il à la lenteur ?
En ce qui concerne les porte-conteneurs rapides de Maersk, tout le problème est là. Ils ont été dessinés pour naviguer à grande vitesse, tels quels ils ne peuvent naviguer lentement de manière économique. Maersk étudie donc leur modification, sans doute en les raccourcissant, pour les adapter à des vitesses en exploitation plus faibles. Il se peut qu'ils intéressent par ailleurs l'US Navy. En attendant, Maersk leur a trouvé une utilisation pour le moins inattendue, puisqu'ils accueillent un jeu d'aventure TV pour enfants ! *(FinancialTimes.com 22/02/2010)*