

MV Balmoral in the Menai Strait

DOUBLE TROUBLE

The vintage excursion ship Balmoral is facing a tough year as it approaches its 70th birthday in 2019. **Steven Kennedy** reports...

The historic passenger vessel Balmoral will sit unused this year after the Maritime & Coastguard Agency (MCA) put a halt to its operations because of concerns about repair work. The charity-owned ship has been a fixture in the waters of SW England for several years, running an annual programme of pleasure cruises. But in recent times the summer sailing days have been limited by poor weather and technical difficulties.

The MV Balmoral Fund revealed at the end of last year that around £3.75m worth of work would need to be carried out because of the MCA's verdict that double plating repairs undertaken over many years were not satisfactory for the vessel's long-term integrity.

A spokesperson for the Agency told the Telegraph: 'The MCA is responsible for the issue of the passenger certificate to Balmoral, and during the last year we have become increasingly concerned about the safety standards on this ship.'

'This passenger ship was built in 1949 and has been repaired many times over the years, and now some of these repairs do not meet MCA expected standards for permanent repairs. MCA has notified the owners to expect to have to replace the doubler plate repairs before a new passenger certificate is issued for the 2018 season.'

'The reason why doubler plates are not acceptable for permanent repairs is that there have been examples where doubler plate repairs have failed without warning,' the MCA spokesperson continued. 'Doubler plates by their very nature cover up the plating below, and this can lead to corrosion of the doubler and shell plating underneath which is invisible until it fails.'

The Balmoral charity has cancelled this year's sailings as it looks to raise the funds – primarily through Heritage Lottery Fund grants – to get the vessel up to standard for 2019.

Work is now well underway to ensure the 688gt ship can be returned to service in its anniversary year.



MV Balmoral approaching Liverpool

‘Our Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) bid is for £3.72m and covers all the work planned and required to operate from 2019 onwards,’ explained Balmoral Fund volunteer Dick Clague. ‘As well as addressing the double plating issue and the rebuilding of crew accommodation, the HLF grant will include funding for enhanced fire suppression arrangements – also required by the MCA. There will also be work on the promenade decking, improved educational facilities and restoration of heritage features of the ship.’

‘Our ongoing discussions with the MCA have been a major factor in putting the bid together,’ he continued. ‘We would hope to have the HLF’s reaction to our bid by the end of March, followed by an invitation to make a second stage bid which is programmed for August to be in time to return Balmoral to service in 2019. We will need to raise at least 10% – or approximately £375,000 – as match funding; but volunteer time can contribute to this.’

Balmoral was originally built for the Red Funnel service between Southampton and the Isle of Wight. In 1969 it moved to P&A Campbell’s White Funnel operation on the Bristol Channel. After its withdrawal from commercial service, the ship started a new – but unsuccessful – life as a floating restaurant in Dundee before being acquired by the charity Waverley Steam Navigation in 1984. It then operated summer excursion sailings round the British coastline until its withdrawal from service at the end of the 2012 season.

In 2015, the newly-formed charity MV Balmoral Fund brought the vessel back in to service, operated by its subsidiary company White Funnel.

Over the years of different ownership and purpose, numerous works were undertaken to ensure the safety and suitability of the vessel. Balmoral used to benefit from ‘grandfather rights’ – a provision in which an old rule continues to apply to some existing situations while a new rule will apply to all future cases – and

this enabled it to continue in service. However, change is now afoot for the regulations applying to heritage vessels. ‘Double plating has been used to repair the hulls of many vessels over the years,’ explained Dick. ‘In the case of MV Balmoral we believe it started during her time with P&A Campbell. Repairs carried out then, and subsequently, have always met the requirements of the MCA, or its predecessors.’

‘A small vessel that sank in 2013 – not connected with Balmoral – was found to have been double plated, and this led to a recommendation from the Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) that double plating should only be allowed for temporary repairs,’ he added.

‘Operating heritage vessels in the modern regulatory environment has become increasingly challenging in recent years, but the safety of our passengers and crew is always our priority,’ Dick commented. ‘Unfortunately,

funds were not immediately available to enable us to carry out the work required in time for operating in 2018 and, for now, MV Balmoral will remain in the care of our volunteer maintenance team led by our chief engineer.’

It means now that the Fund will have the best part of nine months to get the money and complete its repairs. It’s a big ask, given the fact the charity cannot raise funds through its sailing operations, and there is widespread regret that one of the UK’s finest and most loved heritage vessels will not be seen on the water for the foreseeable future.

The hope is, however, that once the money has been raised, and the repairs completed, Balmoral will be given a new lease of life.

‘Much work has been done in the three years since the MV Balmoral Fund took over the ship,’ said Dick. ‘Despite both weather and operational difficulties over the last three summers, we have seen a steady increase in load factors, so we are disappointed not to be sailing in 2018. Our objective is therefore to get her back to sea as soon as possible.’

‘Balmoral could resume service in 2019. Our own fundraising efforts have raised £1.15m over the past four years, including bequests and substantial donations. Fred Olsen Cruises – who operate the cruiseship also named Balmoral – have generously provided a cruise for two as the main prize in our annual draw for several years. This has enabled us to raise over £20,000 in the last three years,’ he added.

‘We are always on the lookout for more volunteers – particularly those living within reach of the ship’s Bristol base. We are also looking for someone to look after our emailing activities, as well as someone with social media skills.’ 

The outcome of the £3.72m Heritage Lottery Fund bid should be known by the end of March



For more information, visit www.mvbalmoral.com or to offer your help, email media@mvbalmoral.com