

## **8 HOURS TO BELFAST!**

***A return trip from Birkenhead – Belfast, courtesy of Norfolkline’s Lagan Viking.***

*(All photographs ©Michael W Clarke)*

A job of work in Belfast with a van full of conference equipment dictated a ferry trip across the Irish sea. Last year, the same occasion took us by road to Stranraer, where we boarded the HSS Stena Voyager for the crossing. This time, we calculated the journey to be somewhat cheaper if we took a shorter road trip to 12 Quays, Birkenhead and took the 8 hour sea voyage on the Norfolkline crossing, in the main, saving an extra night in a Northern Ireland hotel, taking the cabin option on the vessel instead.

Up bright and early on the misty morning of Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> October, I had already deduced, from recent online AIS movements that we would be sailing on ‘Lagan Viking’, a 4 year old 26500GRT 186metre Ro-Pax vessel. We had been asked to book in at the port at least two hours before the 10:30hrs departure time. In reality, due to traffic we rolled up just after 9am, but we were accepted without question. In fact we still had to wait some time whilst the non-accompanied freight loading was completed, during which a small amount of Mersey River activity was observed mostly through the security netting.



***Royal Daffodil***



***Sigas Champion***



***Liverpool Viking, on route for Dublin***

Whilst I recognise the need for security, these plain grey security fences in my opinion do little for the ergonomics of port installations around the British Isles. They could at least find something more pleasing to the eye and whilst they are at it, provide some viewpoints. Anyway, we were eventually waved on. I was surprised that we were not directed via the weighbridge. Although the weight of a loaded transit type van is a drop in the ocean (pun intended) compared to the payload of this vessel, I would have thought accurate weight calculations (since the published report into the demise of ‘Riverdance’) would have been paramount. Having said that, I’m sure the crew know a lot more about the subject than a land-lubber such as myself.



***The Closest I got – 2 quick snaps of our transport through the van window as we were loading.***

We swung around (No through disembarkation on this ferry – last on, first off!) and parked on deck 3. Lagan Viking has 4 vehicle decks, plus a few cars outside on deck 6. An escalator runs from deck 3 to deck 5 - the main passenger deck. You are greeted by the reception desk immediately in front of you, shop to the left, and just further down the corridor, the

cinema to starboard and kids and adults play areas to port. Probably not the best area for the cinema, as I found out later, the noise and vibration from the engines in this area is considerable.

Proceeding down the corridor past the first group of cabins, it opens out into the Coffee Bar where cereals and bacon or sausage baps are also on sale for any late comers (such as us) who didn't get time to visit the port facilities. If you fancy an early tippie, a selection of both alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks are also available.

Continuing on towards the sharp end, we pass the stairway that would take us up to deck 6 where the majority of passenger cabins are situated, and enter the main bar area (bar closed during our crossing, presumably due to the small number of passengers on this trip - about 20). Finally, overlooking the fore-castle, is the restaurant.



**Starboard Promenade + Safety gear    Bar area, Restaurant in the distance.    Fo'c's'le deck**

I would have liked to take more internal photographs. However passengers appear to be rather suspicious of cameras nowadays so I declined if there were any in the shot. Hopefully I may do better on the return journey.

A great deal of my crossing time was spent out on either the starboard or port promenade decks, experimenting with various settings of the new camera. Unfortunately the misty Irish sea played a greater part than I hoped for, really only letting up after we had passed the Isle of Man and were approaching the South Rock area. However, I captured a small amount of Irish Sea activity.



***"Fehn Coral"***



***Seatruck's "Clipper Point"***



***Sister Ship "Mersey Viking"***



***Stena Seafarer – at a distance.***



***Pleasure Cruiser "Southern Belle"***



***"Ben Ellan", obviously loaded.***

Norfolkline has apparently recently changed its meal policy on board. The complimentary lunch given on daytime crossings has now ceased. Lunch is available with main (hot) courses costing in the region of £8.00 per head. That said, we received a good plateful and the quality was more than satisfactory. Overnight crossings I am told, still include 'evening' meal and breakfast in the passage price, provided your booking includes a cabin.

I investigated some of the new camera's zoom features on a few of the lighthouses we passed on the journey. The names were assigned afterwards, courtesy of AIS, ISS and Google, so apologies if I picked the wrong ones.



**Crosby Channel Lightbuoy**



**Chicken Rock, Isle of Man**



**Mew Island**

As we approached Belfast Lough, I noticed a large white shape heading towards us. HSS Stena Voyager had just departed her new link-span on her regular early evening crossing to Stranraer. Some sailors and enthusiasts regard these vessels as 'not real ships' and it is true that their thirst for fuel is leading to their early demise from our waters but I look on them as "Concorde of the Seas". The innovation in both technical specification and the docking facilities displayed by the Stena HSS concept is something that I am sure will influence ferry design well into the future.

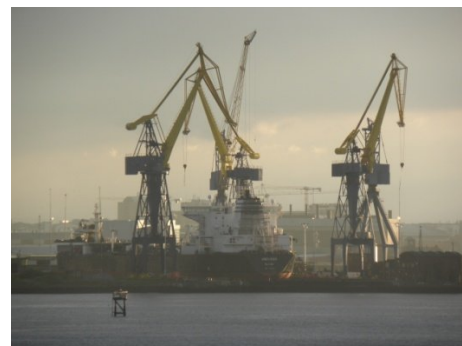


A lot of rumours surround the eventual departure of the HSS trio. As we know, sister ship HSS Discovery is already on her way. The latest gossip around the Holyhead pubs is that it will be the above vessel, and not Stena Explorer that will be following her, the latter to replace the Stena Voyager on the Belfast – Stranraer run. We wait and see!

A few more images captured on our way into Belfast Port:



**One of those world-famous photos!**



**"Aberdeen" receives a little TLC.**



**"Stena Caledonia" still going strong!**



***“Saga Moon” making ready.***



***Finished with Engines! Lagan Viking drops her linkspan.***

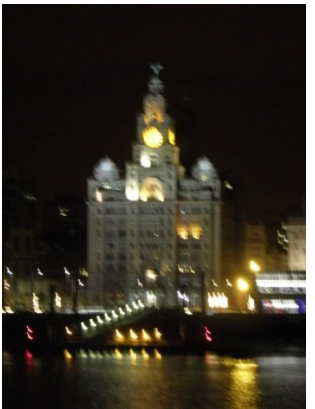
### **Friday Night - The Return Journey:**

All hopes of more on-board photographs rapidly melted away as we took our place in the lane park. By contrast to our first crossing, the ferry was now full. It seems that the total membership of the MUFC supporters club for some reason, reside in Belfast. This crossing we actually rolled up on time, and after half an hour or so, the vehicles were shepherded on to the vessel. Where we start, we mean to continue, as this shepherding concept was very prevalent throughout the journey. As soon as we had identified our cabin and stowed our overnight things, the tannoy – which sounded as though it had endured better days – crackled that dinner was now served. We hurriedly joined the queue, to watch as previous diners were moved on literally as soon as they finished. As we reached the counters, the tannoy now notified passengers that the restaurant would be closing in 15 minutes. We took the precaution of loading our trays with starter, main course and sweet in one go. Again, there were good selection of items and plenty to go round. Some of it was a little on the cool side but that was probably down to our own ‘grab it whilst you can’ attitude. Literally as soon as we had finished our last mouthful we were herded from the restaurant with our bottle of wine (purchased from the bar whilst queuing) still in hand. Within about 10 minutes, the bar had also closed shop. Whether this was normal or just a conservative attitude to the other clientele on board I am not sure, but if so it didn’t work as cans were produced from various bags within the football supporting groups. They have obviously done the journey before, but credit where it is due, the supporters in the main all behaved themselves and atmosphere was quite pleasant.

We hit our cabin about midnight. I don’t think we were expecting a similar standard to our previous evening in one of Belfast’s top 4 star hotels, but ‘basic’ was certainly the description that came to mind. We were in one of the foremost cabins on deck 6, virtually under the bridge wing. No engine noise, very small vibration – which was soaked up by the mattress – and I found I actually slept better than I did the previous night. The most major complaint I can make is that they only offered one small pillow each. For a broad shouldered man, 2 or even 3 would have been better.

5:15am and a knock on the door shortly followed by a ‘wakey wakey’ blast on the tannoy informed us that breakfast was being served. I was already getting up, still with the idea of onboard shots before everybody else came down. (No chance). As we departed the cabin it was noticed that the clean laundry was already dispersed about the corridors, not very health and safety conscious in such small alleyways. No complaints again about the quality of the food with the exception of the toast, which appeared to have been baked somewhat and disintegrated as soon as you took a bite.

Again, the shepherding effect took place and we went out onto the port promenade deck whilst she travelled down the Mersey, swung around and screwed in to the terminal we had left 36 hours earlier.



*A rather blurred Liver Building. "Liverpool Viking" loading*

*"Twelve Quays" Terminal.*

**A word about the camera:**

Previous photographs of mine published on 'Irish Sea Shipping' have all been courtesy of a little HP Photo-smart 'point and shoot' camera. With the frustration experienced at the lack of zoom on that device, it is surprising that the thing isn't yet residing in Davy Jones' locker! All the above photographs have been taken with an Olympus SP-590UZ 12MP device, which sports a x26 optical zoom. Resolution was set to 5MP in all photographs and (with the exception of one of the lighthouse photos, due to the mist) none have been enhanced in any way. I still need to do more work with night time settings but am confident that they are in there somewhere. Cost is in the region of £300.00 and If anybody is considering upgrading with a limited budget, I recommend they check these instruments out.

Michael W. Clarke.  
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