We came to an inhospitable shore and found a people embalmed in custom and the wisdom of the ages. We gave succour to their needs and, in return, took our just reward.

(John Samuel Swire)

At the very core of a shipping line's business stand the routes and ports served. Such services do much to shape the character of the enterprise, for they determine the cargoes to be carried, the types of ships required, the conditions under which ships served and were manned, and the agency business needed. A feature of Blue Funnel operations has always been the enduring and relatively concentrated character of its services. Virtually without exception the Company confined itself to operating regular liners; only rarely were Blue Funnel ships chartered to other lines or were alien vessels chartered by Blue Funnel. These liners carried cargo, with only a limited involvement in passenger traffic, and they traded primarily between the United Kingdom and the Far East via the Suez Canal. Endeavours in other directions, such as the Australian and American trades and the various local and feeder trades in which Ocean became involved never played more than supporting roles to the leading Far Eastern business.

For outward sailings, United Kingdom loadings were confined to west coast ports, with the home port Liverpool (or rather Birkenhead) remaining overwhelmingly the principal outward berth. Loadings were also made at various continental ports, especially Dutch and, after the First World War, North German ports. For homeward traffic London and Liverpool were always the main ports of discharge for the Far Eastern services, Amsterdam for the Java trade, and supplemented by various other continental and United Kingdom ports as circumstances dictated.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the growth and extension of these Blue Funnel operations, so that the subsequent discussion of agencies, conferences, and the more detailed aspects of Company history may be viewed in the overall perspective of Blue Funnel's routine shipping operations. We may emphasise once more, though, that Holts' reputation rested firmly on the continued high standards of these operations. Frequency of services, quality of time-keeping (there
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was a saying in Amsterdam that you could set your watch by the arrival and departure of Blue Funnelers, and meticulous care of cargo all gave to shippers a quality of service unmatched by rival lines.

Broadly speaking the First World War brought to an end a long period of expansion. After 1918, because of difficult world trading conditions, the emphasis had to be upon consolidation rather than upon any new initiatives. Following the Second World War, wartime shipping losses and political uncertainties again largely precluded the development of services beyond those operated and enshrined in conference agreements before 1939. Thus in tracing the growth of Blue Funnel services we must necessarily focus largely on the years before 1918. And here we can see three distinct phases. First came a period of some twenty years following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 when the emphasis was almost exclusively on the Liverpool–Far East trade, supplemented with a small involvement in the local Sumatra–Singapore tobacco trade. In this phase the principal developments were the overall growth of services – the fleet growing from 5 in 1869 to 30 by 1890 – and the gradual extension of ports of call in the Far East. Second, in the 1890s, came a more diversified involvement in the Far East. Local services in South-east Asia were built up, a regular line between Singapore and Java (Dutch East Indies) and Western Australia commenced, and a direct service between Java and Europe started. Third, after 1900, came a notable expansion of horizons. A direct service between the United Kingdom and Australia was established, which by 1910 had developed to include regular passenger ships, while from 1902 some Far Eastern sailings were extended across the Pacific to the western ports of North America. The American services were later modified and extended as a result of two wartime developments, the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 and entry into the New York–Far East trade the following year.

Before we discuss these developments in any detail it is helpful to reflect on a few general background points. In the early days of the Holt enterprise there were few restrictions, beyond commercial considerations and technical feasibility, on the routes a shipowner could operate, the type of cargoes carried, or the frequency of services. True, there were some countries (notably Holland and France) which regulated the carrying trade from their colonies to their home ports in favour of national flag carriers, but for the most part shipowners were free to trade where they pleased. It is worth emphasising that the ‘unequal’ treaties signed in the mid-nineteenth century by European powers with China, Japan, and Siam, prevented these countries from discriminating against foreign vessels. If Alfred Holt wished to send a vessel to Yokohama he could do so. Moreover, the relatively small steamship of the 1860s and 1870s could visit a great number of ports which would have been