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MARIN's relationship with leading French shipping yard Chantiers de l'Atlantique, part of ALSTOM group, goes back more than 50 years and Roger Lepeix, Chantier's head of hydrodynamics, has been a familiar face in the Wageningen headquarters for almost 30 years.

MARIN/Chantiers relationship

In fact on the day of this interview, where Lepeix talks about the extent of the MARIN/Chantiers relationship, he says he has been with the shipyard exactly 30 years and two days and in his position with the yard, he has been coming regularly to the Netherlands since 1972.

Since its creation in 1861, the shipyard has been involved in the construction of passenger ships. This was mostly transatlantic liners until the 1960s and nowadays the yard's name is synonymous with the cruise ships business.

However, although well-known for its cruise liners, the yard has built vessels right across the spectrum, ranging from large naval vessels and historical passenger liners, like "Normandie" and "France". More recently, Chantiers has built containerships, very large tankers up to 550 000 tonnes capacity, as well as specialist tankers, ferries and frigates.

Permanent contact

MARIN has often played an important role in the rigorous testing procedures the French yard demands over the years and today is still no exception. He comments: "There is more or less permanent

contact between the yard and MARIN." In fact, MARIN's standards are often used by the French group as a reference point when Chantiers compares other European basins. "MARIN is definitely in the first rank of modern European basins. It is a very important facility for us, especially with the new Seakeeping and Manoeuvring Basin."

However, the Chantiers/MARIN special relationship does not mean that the French yard does not push for the latest innovation and the yard expects MARIN to continue to offer competitive prices. Despite this, the Wageningen institute is often the preferred partner.

Despite Chantiers exacting standards, the relationship is strong and that means that if Lepeix wants to push forward on the technical side, MARIN is willing to listen and see if it can realise Lepeix's ambitions. "I always look at the possibilities, not the present limits. I will always try to push and perhaps open their eyes." But if MARIN does not know how to do something, they are willing to try and push the boundaries, he stresses.

Industry groups

As well as their own relationship, MARIN and

Chantiers work together through various industry groups such as Co-operative Research Ships (CRS). The French yard has been a member since the very beginning in 1969, and Lepeix himself, since 1974. He has since chaired many groups including the manoeuvring, seakeeping, wake and small vessel groups.

Lepeix is also part of the European "Pods in service" project, a Joint Industry Project co-ordinated by MARIN (see page 8). In addition, Lepeix is the co-ordinator of the European "OPTIPOD" project which has 14 members in seven countries.

Lepeix is particularly pleased that MARIN's Depressurised Towing Tank is reopened because its closure meant the Queen Mary 2 had to be tested elsewhere.

Healthy order book

Despite the September 11 attacks on the U.S. and the consequent impact on the cruise market, Chantiers' order book is still looking very healthy. No cruise liners have been cancelled. The French company still has eight firm orders for cruise liners, as well as a two-frigate order for the Moroccan Royal Navy and two forebodies of

continues to flourish

Propulsion changes

Lepeix comments that it is impossible to predict the future. As he points out, nobody could have forecast the huge change in propulsion, the use of pods and gas turbines.

Chantiers is currently taking a further step forward in terms of innovation with the much-heralded Queen Mary 2. This huge 345m transatlantic passenger vessel, due for delivery in 2003, will have

helicopter carriers for the French navy. In fact, the yard has enough work until 2004 and it will probably soon be inviting tenders from the European basins for several new projects.

At the moment, MARIN is doing tests on behalf of Chantiers for a cruise vessel, owned by Japan's NYK. Seakeeping and manoeuvring tests, as well as propulsion and crabbing ability tests, are being carried out.

"There is good co-operation, I know everyone here."

four pods, two of which will be fixed. This vessel represents a big challenge, says Lepeix. "This is special because it evokes memories of transatlantic liners such as the first Queen Mary which was built in the 1930s, but there is a big difference on the hydrodynamic side." He adds: "The external appearance shows some similarities with the old time liners but the power and speed must correspond to that of a modern vessel."

Innovation will be the key as the view above and below the water line will be very different and the junction linking the two is very complicated.

Although the future is hard to predict, says Lepeix, there is certainly a clear trend towards further co-operation in the industry. "There is more co-operation in shipbuilding, between shipyards, more open discussion, exchange of knowledge, sharing of R&D and building improvements." He is sure this will continue between European shipyards and this trend could eventually include suppliers such as steel, cable suppliers and eventually, even basins.

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