

## ACL poised to order quintet to replace G3s

*Transatlantic specialist set to shortly sign letter of intent for largest ro-ros ever built*

AN order for the largest ro-ro ships ever built is due to be placed within a matter of weeks.

Atlantic Container Line hopes to sign a letter of intent later this month and confirm the contract in early October.

The ships will be of revolutionary design, with capacity for containers as well as cars and ro-ro cargo, adjustable decks and many other innovations, plus far better fuel efficiency than their predecessors.

The transatlantic specialist has made no secret of its planned newbuilding programme, and has been in discussion with shipyards for several years. But with no modern blueprints available for such ships, ACL has spent time making sure the specifications are exactly right before going ahead.

ACL chief executive Andrew Abbott is now confident that the design work is almost there, enabling him to give the green light very imminently.

“They are going to be the best of their type in the world,” he predicts.

The number of shipyards has been whittled down from 17 to a shortlist of four in South Korea and China, but ACL is insisting that European manufacturers supply much of the equipment in order to facilitate any subsequent repair and maintenance work.

Price-wise, Grimaldi subsidiary ACL has benefited considerably from the protracted planning phase. The cost will be far cheaper than if orders had been placed when ACL first started to consider newbuildings some three years ago. But Mr Abbott is adamant that the successful shipyard will not necessarily be the one with the cheapest bid.

The five ships ACL is planning to order will replace its current fleet of G3 vessels that were built in 1984 and 1985 — Atlantic Cartier, Atlantic Companion, Atlantic Compass, Atlantic Concert and Atlantic Conveyor. The multipurpose ro-ros were all renovated in 2004 and, despite their age, have never had a breakdown, according to Mr Abbott.

Once the new ships are delivered in 2013, the G3 vessels will either be sold to the military or scrapped. However, ACL will not allow a potential competitor to buy them.

The dimensions of the newbuildings will be similar to the G3 ships, which are 292 m long, in order to fit the Liverpool locks. But their capacity will be considerably more than the G3 vessels that have a container-carrying intake of about 1,850 teu, and carry around 1,000 cars as well as the equivalent of 1,000 teu of ro-ro freight.

All five ships are flagged in Sweden, but no decision has been made yet on where the newbuildings will be registered.

ACL, which has focused solely on the north Atlantic since it was set up by a consortium of major European lines in the mid-1960s, may add a US east coast southern call to its existing eight port schedule when the new ships are delivered.

Although its vessels will only be deployed on the Atlantic, ACL now has a global network of customers, transshipping cargo in Europe onto either Grimaldi vessels, or those of other lines.