

Big White heads to breakers as old ships face higher costs

Janet Porter and Nigel Lowry - Friday 1 February 2008

SAFMARINE'S famous Big White quartet may soon be just a trio amid reports that the 3,100 teu Winterberg is heading for the scrapyard.

Greek owner Danaos, which bought the four ships in 2003, is thought to have sold Winterberg after deciding the vintage vessel was too elderly and fuel-hungry to justify another drydocking.

Danaos would not comment on the speculation, but Lloyd's MIU data shows that Bangladesh breakers bought the ship recently and renamed it Wilmington.

The former SA Winterberg and its sisterships are some of the oldest containerships in service, and acquired their nickname because of their white hulls.

They were built in France in the late 1970s and for most of their commercial life were operated by Safmarine in the Europe-South Africa trades, carrying passengers as well as containerised cargoes, including refrigerated produce.

If the reports that Winterberg is to be demolished are confirmed, this would place a question mark over the commercial viability of other elderly tonnage that is expensive to run.

There is no shortage of demand for containerships of that size, but as bunker costs soar container lines are becoming far more selective about the tonnage they deploy. However, Danaos said last week that Winterberg's sistership Helderberg had just been fixed for another year, while negotiations for the charter of the Sederberg are currently being held.

The fourth in the group, the Maersk Constantia, formerly SA Waterberg, is still on charter. Winterberg was thought to be scheduled for the dry dock when Danaos decided to sell the ship instead.

Safmarine announced a few months ago that the Big Whites were being phased out from its fleet and returned to their owner as charter contracts expired.