



# Gravesend Sea School/College

## The Masthead

Issue No 35



September 2011

### Our President reports



I was asked by Mrs Mashiter the head of the PLA legal dept if I could give a talk on our old sea school to the London Dock Lands History Group at the Museum of London Dock Lands, No.1 Warehouse, West India Dock., Canary Wharf London E14. I agreed to do this and the date was set for May 4th 2011. I travelled up to London by car. It was a bit hair raising to say the least and it took me three hours to get there due to all the traffic. I had left home early so that I could get a look around in the museum as I had never been there before. I managed about one hour before it closed and I had to give my talk. Rather disappointed as there were no model ships, it was mainly about the slave trade and how the docks were built. About the DHG. The Dock lands History Group (DHG) came into being in 1979 as an independent body to encourage greater understanding of all aspects of the Port of London, and the maritime, industrial and social history of the River Thames, together with its continuing development. Amongst DHG's members are many of the people whose dedication to the area contributed to the creation of the long-awaited Museum of London Dock lands established now on West India Quay.

#### The Talk

I was made most welcome, they even provided me with a lap top and projector to show some pictures There was around 35/40 members attending.

I had spent quite some time getting ready for the event but why I bothered I don't really know as I never even looked at what I had written. But I had them laughing on lots of occasions and I think all of them really enjoyed the Talk. I could have carried on for much longer but they had to stop me as we ran out of time but I got the impression that they would like me to go again.

Also one of them is a member of a Thames barge group in Gravesend who thinks they would like me to go to them, but only time will tell and I had no need to worry as it was a great evening and I even got paid for going.

Ref:-

**London & South East Port Welfare Committee Meeting Held at the Queen Victoria Seamen's Rest London Tuesday May 31<sup>st</sup> 2011**

Dear John

As requested I attended the above meeting to represent the MNA. I was very well received and made most welcome.

The meeting was very interesting and very well conducted by the Chairman Captain Peter White. & the Port Welfare Administrator Mrs Carolyn Lewis

We proceeded through the agenda and as it was my first visit I was not in a position to make any comments. However two items came up in any business. The first was regarding the plan by Banks to stop issuing cheques. This would affect many of our maritime charities and also our association. And other associations who collect most of their subs via bank cheques. The chair requested for names to be put forward in support against this happening, and requested that we all write to our MPs either a personal letter, or if you prefer you can request a copy of the MNWB letter which Carolyn has drafted. I said that I was pretty sure that the MNA Members would agree to support the committee in this matter; I would pass on the request to our committee officers to inform our members of the request. I also commented on Veterans Day being changed to "Armed Forces" day and that many Merchant Seamen felt that they had now been excluded as we were not Armed Forces, and that "Veterans Day" should remain just that, as it covers all veterans who have served their country. This was noted by members attending and will be put on the agenda for the 14<sup>th</sup> of June meeting. The meeting planned for Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> October has now been changed to the 11<sup>th</sup>.

Hope this report is to your satisfaction.

Kind regards.

**John D Meadowcroft**

### The Merchant Navy Medal

As you will probably know the MNWB is now responsible for the administration of the Merchant Navy Medal and I am therefore writing to remind you, in a timely manner, that the closing date for nominations is 30<sup>th</sup> June.

The Merchant Navy Medal provides an opportunity for the industry to recognise, in a worthy and public manner, meritorious service by, or on behalf of, British merchant seafarers and members of the UK fishing fleets. The Medal is awarded annually, without bias towards age or rank, to up to 15 persons who are judged to have made a worthwhile contribution to merchant shipping, its operations, development, personnel, welfare or safety. Additionally an unlimited number can be awarded to those who have performed acts of courage afloat. It is up to those making nominations to ensure that a case for their candidate is presented in terms that can be interpreted with reasonable latitude and generosity. Up to five of the Medals per year may be awarded "honoris causa" to any persons who have made a significant contribution to merchant shipping, its personnel or its affairs, but who are not themselves British Merchant Seafarers. Any of the awards can also be made posthumously.

Details of the nomination process, along with the names of previous recipients, can be found on the website; <http://www.merchantnavymedal.org> Should you have anyone in mind that you feel would be deserving of this prestigious award I would be most grateful if you could forward the nomination at your earliest opportunity

Best regards

**David**

Capt D A Parsons MNI Chief Executive  
Merchant Navy Welfare Board

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**Leaving New York on the night of Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> April 1912**, the Cunard White Star **SS Carpathia** headed for Rijeka unaware she was also sailing into the history books when three days later she became famous for saving 702 survivors

from the ill-fated **Titanic**. Harold Cottam, wireless operator on the Carpathia was reporting on the bridge when the "unsinkable" **Titanic** sent out her distress signal that she had struck an iceberg and was sinking. He therefore missed the first frantic messages for help. When he returned to the radio room he received a message from Cape Roe, Newfoundland, informing him they had private traffic for the Titanic.

Wishing to be helpful he contacted the Titanic to make them aware there was a lot of traffic waiting for them at Cape Roe. He was barely into the message when he was horrified to receive the message "We are sinking. Come at once."

Hurrying to the Bridge to notify the officer of the watch they then dashed to the Captain's cabin and awoke the sleeping Captain Rostron and blurted out the awful news. Never having faced such a distressing situation before, Captain Rostron however rose to the challenge with remarkable efficiency. He immediately ordered a change of course to head for the stricken vessel at her approximate position and issued a string of orders to meet the situation. Off duty firemen, stokers and greasers were ordered to proceed to the engine room to assist in raising every ounce of steam possible; raising the vessel's usual steady 14 knots to 17 knots.

The Titanic was estimated to be 60 miles away and it would take four hours to reach her at maximum speed. Steam was cut off from the ship's heating and water supplies to increase efficiency, public rooms were prepared to care for the sick and wounded survivors, and the ship's medical staff and any passengers with medical knowledge were mustered. Spare cabins including those of the officers were prepared for the survivors, spare blankets were collected for their warmth and comfort, and stewards were ordered to have hot food and drink immediately available. Meanwhile the ship's lifeboats were swung out, pilot ladder slung over the side, all gangway doors were opened, and netting and extra chairs were made available to use as slings to pick up survivors. Stewards were appointed to take the names of survivors as they came aboard.

Increasing speed to 17 knots was a brave decision by Captain Rostron who was fully aware of the existence of icebergs which could so easily inflict on his ship the same fate as the foundering Titanic. Extra lookouts were positioned and searchlights mounted to illuminate the inky blackness. In fact she navigated around six icebergs on the way.

The ageing ship (launched 6<sup>th</sup> August 1902) vibrated heavily at the additional workload as the engines strained to meet the extra power demanded of them. Firemen and Stokers laboured continually to keep the hungry furnaces stoked up in the hell hole of the bowels of the ship.

On the Titanic the radio operators were still desperately trying to draw attention to their sinking vessel and were becoming frustrated by the lack of response to the international distress signal C.Q.D (CQ meaning attention all vessels and D meaning distress or danger) In desperation operator Jack Phillips sent out the then new SOS signal; one of the first times this new signal had been transmitted. With relief they heard that the Carpathia had received their distress call and was steaming full

ahead to their aid. Other ships eventually contacting the stricken vessel were too far away to be of assistance, much as they desired to.

In spite of their Captain thanking them for doing a great job and to abandon ship Jack Phillips stayed on still sending out distress calls until eventually he had to leave his post. Sadly Jack became one of the lost souls, dying from hypothermia. After navigating around ice fields the Carpathia eventually arrived at the scene of the tragedy at 0400hrs and searched the sea for survivors. The Titanic was by then resting on the sea bed. The Carpathia fired a series of rockets to alert the Titanic lifeboats they had arrived and eventually a crew member noticed a green flare which was identified as one of the Titanic lifeboats. Soon the survivors were gratefully heading for the Carpathia.

First to arrive alongside at 0410hrs and disembark its bewildered, tearful, frightened and shocked survivors was boat number 2 under the command of 4<sup>th</sup> Officer Joseph Boxhall. The last boat was No 12 with so many on board the sides were inches from the water. This was under the command of 2<sup>nd</sup> Officer Charles Herbert Lightoller. The survivors all clung desperately to the hope their loved ones had been picked up by other ships or were already on board the Carpathia. Sadly



a total of 1500 passengers and crew were lost on that fateful night, mainly from hypothermia. As there was insufficient food on board to feed the additional 702 persons Captain Rostron decided to steam back to New York to disembark the survivors, He and his crew received a hero's welcome and grateful survivors

organised a committee who raised a fund to aid destitute third class passengers, to present a silver cup to Captain Rostron and to order the striking of a medal for Captain (gold), officers (silver) and bronze for the crew. This was presented by chair Molly Brown (Margaret Brown). The medal is inscribed "Presented to the Captain Officers and Crew of RMS Carpathia in recognition of gallant and heroic service From the Survivors of the SS Titanic April 15<sup>th</sup> 1912. One of the bronze medals sold in Bonham's Marine Sales in London sold for £6000. Page three of the Times Monday 16<sup>th</sup> December recorded that Chief Engineer Mr A Johnstone received a substantial cheque, a silver tea and coffee service and a punch bowl. Other engineers received gold watches with suitable inscriptions and monograms from the Lord Mayor of Liverpool.

**The Sailors and Firemen Union were presented with a cheque for £48 to be divided among the recorded 48 greasers, firemen and trimmers if they could be found. Otherwise the money will be devoted to the Union's sick fund.**

*A sad footnote to the gallant Carpathia is that while sailing in convoy bound for Boston on July 17, 1918 she was spotted by German U-Boat U-55 and was suddenly struck by two torpedoes 170 miles from Bishop's Rock off the Isle of Scilly. As the crew were manning the lifeboats a third torpedo was fired instantly killing five of the engine room crew still in the engine room.*

*157 passengers and the surviving crew were rescued by HMS Snowdrop the following day and brought safely to Liverpool. On 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2000 it was recorded that the wreck of the Carpathia was discovered intact and sitting upright at the bottom of the Atlantic 120 miles south of Fastnet, Ireland. **Golden Tumber***



### FROM POET TO EXPLORER...MS MARCO POLO

Second of a quintet of 'poet' class ships named after Russia's greatest poets and writers, the liner Alexandr Pushkin was built at the Mathias-Thesen Werft in Wismar, former East Germany in 1965. These five ships were the fastest, largest and most prestigious liners in the Soviet passenger fleet, at the time the largest in the world.

The Alexandr Pushkin's sleek profile and innovative design featured all accommodation for both passenger and crew having a seaview (albeit less than half had private facilities), full air-conditioning, stabilisers, and a heated indoor swimming pool with a sliding glass roof that could be opened in favourable weather. Commissioned as the flagship of Leningrad's Baltic Shipping Co., with Leningrad her homeport and port of registry, the ship's hull was specially strengthened for the icy Baltic waters. Given the global political climate of the time, her construction also took into consideration the possibility of alternative military use as a troopship and as such the provision and storage areas were unusually large, permitting a cruising range of well over 10,000 nautical miles.

The Pushkin entered service in August 1965 with a series of cruises before taking up her intended employment during the following spring, reopening a Soviet service on the North Atlantic, dormant since the onset of the Cold War in the late Forties. A regular transatlantic service between Leningrad, Bremerhaven, London, Le Havre and Montreal was established and the schedule continued through to the late Seventies. The transatlantic service operated in the summer months, with cruises to some warmer climes during the winter often under charter to western companies.

Uniquely, an enclosed wraparound promenade on what is now Pacific Deck meant that daily constitutionals could be made even in the ravages of the rough and stormy Atlantic. On the very top deck were kennels for passengers of the canine variety – cats and birds could also be carried. A small number of motor vehicles were transportable thanks to two side loading doors and lifts down to a hold. On today's Magellan Deck there were also two sheltered promenades along either side of the ship. A cinema, library (stocked with Soviet literature) plus five bars would keep the adult passengers happy whilst children could amuse themselves in the small playroom complete with slide and roundabout, or small paddling pool. A peaceful lounge by day and nightclub until the early hours graced today's Navigator Deck. An extensive refit in 1975 improved Alexandr Pushkin for further cruising; several 'inside' cabins were added, her main lounge was extended forward and upwards to become a double-height ballroom with a balcony, an outside pool was installed in what is now Scott's Bar, and her tonnage increased to 20,502 GRT. Although very popular cruising for the British market out of the UK (mostly Tilbury) in the late sixties and early seventies, the arrival of her brand new sister ship Mikhail Lermontov in 1972 saw the latter ship taking over this role and the Pushkin moved to the West German market. For the years 1979 - 1984 she was under permanent charter to Germany's transocean Tours. On a six week voyage starting at the end of August 1984 the ship bade farewell to Europe as she sailed on her final ocean voyage for the Baltic Shipping Company on the long trek to Vladivostock and transferral to the Far Eastern Shipping Company. Re-registered in Vladivostock, she entered a new stage of her career under charter to CTC Cruises Australia. Many of these cruises were advertised as '18-30 Holidays' and by all accounts were as wild as one would imagine..

In February 1990 the 'Alex', as the Aussies fondly named her, arrived in Singapore supposedly for a refit, but with the collapse of the Soviet Union and consequent financial difficulties in addition to necessary and very expensive technical upgrades, she was laid up in a grimy backwater. Fortunately, Gerry Herrod, an astute British entrepreneur with several successful ventures behind him including a luxury cruise line, realised the immense potential of such an elegant and sturdy lady and by 1991 had purchased her. Renamed Marco Polo and flying the Bahamas flag, she was brought to Greece where a renovation entailing the entire gutting of the ship and lasting almost three years at the cost of US\$60 million was carried out. The superstructure was extended aft and upwards, and her funnel was heightened, enhancing her beautiful silhouette. The Dining Room, ship's galley, engines and original swimming pool are all that remain that are identifiable. The three stairwells which previously were spiral with a void so that one could see all the way vertically up/down through the ship were converted into today's 'square' stairways. The original ship's bell from Alexandr Pushkin is now on display in the Nansen Card Room.

The ship, now measuring 22,080 tons, emerged into the next stage of her life in November 1993, with her maiden voyage as Orient Lines' mv Marco Polo from Mombasa to Cape Town. She had been designed specifically for expedition and destination cruising in the Far East, hence the specially commissioned Asian and Oriental artwork found aboard today, with December - February to be spent in Antarctica. For these months a helicopter was carried on her purpose built helideck in order to scout for whales, wildlife and ice-free passages. The classic liner quickly developed a keen and very loyal following and established herself as a market leader. By 1998, one of the world's largest cruise lines, Norwegian Cruise Line, made Orient Lines an offer they couldn't refuse, and not only the ship but the cruise line itself was bought by NCL. In March 2008, Marco Polo was acquired by her present owners, Greece's Global Cruise Lines and, following a curtailed charter with the now defunct Transocean Tours, which saw her return to Antarctica in winter 2008-2009, she is now operated by Cruise and Maritime Voyages, and frequenting many more of her former haunts, not least her homeport of London Tilbury in this, the latest chapter of a very remarkable career.

BY MERIEL LOWE



Ian Warren

#### Are you thinking of booking a cruise?

As an independent cruise consultant my aim is to find the right cruise for you, at a price you can afford. If you would like a quotation, or just have a question about cruising in general (ocean or river), then please get in touch. Please can you mention the NSTS/C (I am member number 201) when you do.

If you would like to receive a weekly email containing special offers and cruise news, just email your details to me.



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**Billy McGee writes:**

***The National MNA are looking for stories to put in the forthcoming Merchant Navy Day 2011 Commemorative Brochure. This is one I have sent in and would like to share it here.***

### **The Destruction of Convoy SL-64S**

By the end of 1940 the strangle hold on Britain was beginning tighten even more. In the first eighteen months of the war some 1,294 Merchant ships totaling 4,779,945grt tonnage had been sunk with the British taking the brunt of the losses with 781 Merchant ships sunk, with the loss of 8,528 British seamen and hundreds more injured and maimed. 1941 would see no let up and by the end of February 1941 a further 170 Merchant ships had been sunk of 630,337grt, with the loss of a 1,390 British Merchant Seamen

The following is just one story, a tiny part of the war, but after seventy years the story has still not drawn to its final conclusion. The SL/MKS series of convoys ran from Freetown Sierra Leone from September 1939 throughout the war and not one single convoy was ever canceled from the 178 convoys, which departed Freetown. From May 1943 the convoys would rendezvous with the Gibraltar MKS series for the final part of the trip home to the United Kingdom

On the 30th January 1941 a total of 28 ships were formed into Convoy SL-64 of which 19 of these ships were given the prefix SL-64S, the S denoting "slow" as they did not have the 9 knot minimum speed to keep up with the convoy and it was known they would be left vulnerable and without escort at some point. This must have left the Masters and crew somewhat apprehensive and even angry as they steamed past no less than four Cruisers, four Corvettes, ten Naval Trawlers and a Naval Sloop moored alongside as they left port. It being presumed the Admiralty thought their ships had more important tasks than to look after these little Merchant ships, which just so happened to be carrying over 150,000 tons of much need supplies to our beleaguered Island.

After just two days the 19 ships from SL-64S huddled together in tight formation under the guidance of the Convoy Commodore ship SS Warlabey as the faster ships slowly disappeared over the horizon. On the 12th February 1941 the slower convoy had crossed over 1700 nautical miles of ocean and was about 184 nautical miles East of Sao Miguel, Azores and still holding formation, with only two ships straggling behind unable to keep the seven and a half knot speed. On the same day a large war ship was sighted astern gaining on the convoy and to the relief of the crews of the Merchant ships believing the Admiralty had decided after all to send an escort to their aid. Men started to line the rails of their ships and watched in awe as the Cruiser sailed between the center columns of the convoy. Their relief was short lived as the unknown warship suddenly identified herself by raising her battle ensign, as that of the German Cruiser Admiral Hipper. (The Cruiser had earlier come across one of the stragglers, SS Shrewsbury from the convoy and had sunk her with the loss of twenty crew) This mighty war ship displacing some 18,600 ton with a main armament of eight 8 inch guns unleashed a mighty salvo at the Convoy Commodore ship at close range and when the smoke settled the Warlabey had gone within two minutes taking thirty-six of her thirty-nine crew with her. Salvo after salvo was fired into the convoy which now desperately tried evasive action to escape the carnage. Five other ships soon followed the Warlabey to a watery grave including the SS Derrynane, SS Westbury, SS Perseus, SS Borgestad and SS Owestry Grange, with a combined loss of one hundred and twelve seamen. A number of the Merchant ships had attempted

some resistance firing at the Cruiser with their small DEMS armaments. This was short lived and the ships were blasted out of the water. A further two ships were damaged before the Cruiser made good her escape in case any radio transmissions had been made. The remnants of convoy SL-64S were left to fend for themselves, with a number heading for shelter at the Azores

The story now turns to the other straggler from Convoy SL-64S. SS Nailsea Lass, 4,289grt, (Nailsea SS. Co. Ltd). Built in 1917, purchased by the Evan & Reid Management Co. Ltd of Cardiff in 1936. This rusty twenty-four year old tramp steamer was already past her prime and if not for the war, would have been sent to the breakers yard. At the beginning of the war the ship had been employed around the British coast and had been involved in one North Atlantic convoy. In July 1940 she had joined the outward bound convoy OB-186 from Liverpool and dispersed with her final destination being Calcutta arriving on the 24th September 1940. After loading a mixed cargo of charcoal, iron, pig iron and a general cargo the ship sailed independently to Freetown via Colombo, Durban & Capetown. Originally designated to join the 19 ship Convoy SL-63S, the ship was forced to return with engine defects. After eventually sailing in the next convoy the ill fated SL-64S, the old tramp steamer could not even keep the seven and a half not speed required and was straggling the convoy on the very first day. Her bottom badly fouled with weed and years of neglect had left the ship in a poor state. Her Master, Captain Thomas Llewellyn Bradford had no choice but steam on, all to unaware of the unfolding nightmare beset those ships that had left him in their wake. Twenty-five days after leaving Freetown, oblivious to the carnage, which had earlier taken place, the Nailsea Lass found herself sixty miles South-West of Fastnet, the most southerly point of Ireland and had been ordered to the South-West of England without closing the French coast

On the evening of the 24th February 1941 at 21.43 hours (CET) a single torpedo from U-48 detonates under the bridge of the Nailsea Lass. After examining the damage the ship is ordered abandoned by Captain Bradford and all thirty-six crew get away in two life-boat before the ship sinks just over half an hour later. U-48 then approaches the life-boats in order to question the survivors before removing the Captain and his Chief Officer, Alfred Hodder, taking them prisoner. Both men were landed at St. Nazaire three days later and were eventually interned at the Merchant Navy purpose built POW camp Milag Nord. Captain Bradford would remain in the camp until liberated on the 28th March 1945. Chief Officer Hodder was repatriated to the United Kingdom on the 16th October 1943 in a prisoner exchange, mainly made up of the older or sick prisoners. The remaining survivors in the two boats now in charge of by the Second and Third Mates were left to battle against the elements. After becoming separated the two boats finally came ashore two days later at Ballytragh, Co. Kerry and Berehaven, Co. Cork respectively.

The story does not finish here either. On the Tower Hill Memorial on Panel 71 are the names of five crew members lost from this ship. In fact only one name should be named there. Reason being the others lie buried in unmarked graves. During the horrendous conditions endured over the two day period Thomas Harris a ships Fireman died from exposure and his body was committed to the deep by his shipmates. When the other lifeboat came ashore, three men were found to be dead from exposure. They were identified as Uriah Bailey (Fireman & Trimmer) age 60, Ben Leigh (Fireman & Trimmer) age 54 and John Robert (Fireman & Trimmer) age 44. A fourth crew member, the ships cook Kamarswarry Velu age 45 died later at Catherdaniel and all four men were buried at the Catherdaniel Graveyard on Abbey Island. . . .*continued on Page 5.*

*...continued from Page 4*

In 2010 contact of mine found documents in the Dublin archives from British and Irish authorities relating to the burial of these men and found three had been buried together just outside of the cemetery wall, with the other buried some five yards away. The reason they were buried the other side of the cemetery wall is not clear and grave markers were never put in place. Contact was made with Kerry County Council confirming the existence of the graves, but the exact location was unknown. Contact was made with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the representative for Ireland recently visited the site. Unable to find any evidence from the local church registry and being unable to locate the exact location of the graves due to the ground being heavily overgrown, the Commission has decided not to place any form of marker in the near vicinity of their final resting place.

I feel that just because the exact position of the burials can not be confirmed, is not a good enough reason for the CWGC to decline a proper headstone to mark their final resting place. One reason is I have evidence of a war grave in the Suda War Cemetery of that of a Merchant Seaman's headstone engraved with the words "Buried near this spot" The people of Catherdaniel held a service in 2011 on the 70th Anniversary to remember these men. We should not abandon them either. Out of respect they are due the recognition they rightfully deserve by placing a marker on their final resting place.

**Billy McGee**

*Also from Billy McGee . . .*

**Several years ago a Dr Peter Marsden, a Consultant Archaeologist & Historian was involved in taking the MOD to the High Court over their decision not to protect the merchant ship SS STORAA, torpedoed in 1943 with 21 men killed.** The main outcome was that the High Court & the Court of Appeal ruled that merchant ships sunk whilst in convoy (ie. under Admiralty orders) were "in military service" and therefore qualify for protection under the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986. The MOD did not like this as it wanted only to protect warships - including U-boats! As a result the MOD did protect STORAA, but to this day she is the only Protected sunken merchant ship. Since then, the Dept for Transport, that owns most merchant ship wrecks through wartime insurance, has decided to ignore the High Court ruling; and last year issued a salvage contract to an American salvage company to salvage the GAIRSOPPA in which over 30 people died in WW2. There has been no consultation either with the MN veteran bodies like MNA, or with the MOD. However, the MOD has said that, although it has no staff to undertake the historical work, it is prepared to consider applications for designation from Veteran bodies like MNA.

I was contacted by Dr. Marsden and asked if I could help. Always up for a challenge, I set about tracing the convoy details of the 2,089 ships commemorated on Tower Hill (excluding those from the fishing fleet). After being given exclusive access to the late Arnold Hagues convoy database, I was able to conclude that 250 of those ships listed on Tower Hill survived the war, 561 were lost while sailing independently, 205 were lost after dispersing from their convoys, while 112 were lost while having become stragglers from their convoys. Of the remaining 961 ships excluding a number sunk in port or smaller river vessels, the task is complete and all convoy data has been compiled and sent to Dr Marsden who will now contact the relevant authorities and veteran bodies to plan the next step.

**Let's We Forget !**

### Our Ships Have Sailed

Max Hastings' description of how Brazil and the Far East are expanding (Mail) prompts me to mention the shipping magazine to which I subscribe and whose current issue reports the construction of the largest iron ore carrier to date.

It was built in South Korea, commissioned by a Brazilian mining company to transport ore from Brazil to China, and will carry a dead weight payload of 460,000 tons in seven holds. This is the first of seven vessels of the same design ordered from the same firm, and a further 12 vessels of similar size are on order from a Chinese shipyard.

It's estimated that when all these vessels are in commission, they will be transporting 1.8 million tons of ore to China-in addition to the iron ore the Chinese are already sourcing from other countries throughout the world. No wonder China is becoming the major manufacturing country in the world.

My magazine carries reports every month of new ships of various types and sizes being built and launched worldwide, mainly by various countries in the Far East and also by some European countries- but never by Britain, even though we were once the world's premier ship-building nation.

Modern technology makes it possible to build ships which can carry up to 15,000 x 20ft containers while being operated by as few as 13 crew members, and the same is true of very large crude-oil carriers. Why are we not producing these new vessels? We ought, at least, to be importing iron ore to make steel to build the ships to be sold to other countries

**George Beard**

**Daily Mail Letters to the Editor. Sent in by Dave Morris (Research)**



I read the article about John Blake in the Masthead. I was involved in erecting a headstone for a local seaman lost from the Samtampa in 1947 just a few years ago, who had no grave marker at all. After raising the funds for the headstone, I thought it would be easy to have put in place. Not so. After contacting the local Council, I was informed that I needed the permission from a next of kin of the family. This was achieved by a story the local Evening Gazette ran, and as luck would have it, his twin brother was still around and lived ten minutes from my house. Unfortunately the Council then informed me it was what used to be known as a paupers grave as the family could not afford to purchase the plot at the time and that no permanent headstone was allowed to be erected unless someone purchased the plot for £350. I had raised the same amount to cover the cost of the headstone, but could not expect the family to pay for the plot. Common sense only prevailed when I contacted my then local MP Dari Taylor, who intervened and the Council wavered the plot fee, as long as I did not let it be publicly known to the masses.

**Regards. Billy McGee**



For the record, the relative of John Blake (June Masthead) initially only asked if we could help in locating John's unmarked grave in Gravesend cemetery. This we did, thanks to the help of Colin Bryant (Member 291) who lives in Gravesend. A few of our members emailed me and thought it would be a nice gesture to raise funds for a headstone to mark John's grave. We have heard nothing more from the relative since, except to thank us for our help. **ED**

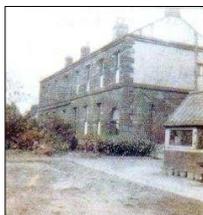
*We have already featured extracts from John Baister's excellent account of his life at sea. I have now taken the opportunity to go back to the very beginning of his very enjoyable journal. Ed*

This period of the 1920s and 30s on Tyneside, in which my first seventeen years are set, would fit neatly into many of Catherine Cookson's novels. Although I never suffered the deprivation of her fictitious characters, the poverty was all around us. Only when I thought I had finished this sketch of my first seventeen years and read what I had written did I recall so many incidents that I should have included. I now feel I could compete with Sheherazade in the Arabian Nights and relate a different story for a thousand and one nights. Whether the stories would save my life is another matter. While I remember that Dorothy had the nickname of Bunty and Pa always referred to Joyce as Jane, Margery was affectionately referred to as "Pussy". Other additional recollections would involve a degree of research. Many of the terms used at sea I forgot to include but I do recall porridge being referred to as "burgoo" and steamed haddock as "toe rag". Rock cakes and buns were known as "tab nabs". There were, of course, a number of other seafaring expressions that are unprintable even though they were simply used to express the extreme importance of a particular situation. One grim incident I could have included was the time when a number of stokers and trimmers gathered at the foot of the ladder up to the captain's quarters to protest about the standard of food. The food on this ship was really bad and they wanted to send a spokesman up to the captain's deck to demand an improvement. As the man ascended the ladder, the stocky, tough Welsh Captain Llew Thomas waited until the man was almost at the top then thrust his foot at the stoker's chest and sent him crashing down the steel ladder. Although badly bruised, the spokesman capitulated and he and his fellow protesters slunk back to their quarters. That, by the way, is not an incident that occurred on the *SS Bayano*.

In spite of the re-awakening of so many more incidents since embarking on this narrative I do not intend to rewrite my story. I feel there is enough written material to provide the reader with an insight into, if not an understanding, of this period of my life

The Poplars, number three St Johns Street, Percy Main, was a house owned by the North Eastern Railway Company. It was let to my father, Charles Norman Baister, a locomotive engineer at the Percy Main Railway Works. Percy Main, a small industrial town six miles east of Newcastle, had nothing that could give it claim to being a place of importance. There were numerous small marine works that serviced the great ship building yards but the principal works were the locomotive sheds. St. Johns Street led to a hump-backed stone bridge that spanned a badly maintained railway. The unkempt lines, just visible through the thick layers of coal dust, were strewn with lumps of coal that fell from the coal trucks. The maintenance of these dirty railways that were used to transport coal from the local collieries came a long way down the list of priorities where profits headed the list. Coal was the lifeblood of Tyneside. The thousands of chimneys of the houses and industrial works belched out clouds of polluted smoke that precipitated over everything and laid a veil of grime on every building.

The large stone built house in St Johns Street stood in fairly large grounds. Two long greenhouses adjoined the gable end of the house. The heavy stonework, grey from the grime of a coal mining and industrial environment, was characteristic of the grimness of a Tyneside town in the nineteen twenties. The house did gain some dignity from the arched doorway, and the tall windows,



all curtained in white starched lace, just about lifted it out of the "crowblack", "bible-black" context of a Dylan Thomas scene. I was born in this house in 1921.

My eldest sister, Joyce, was born in the same house in 1916, and Margery, my youngest sister, in 1922. Three years after I was born, at the age of thirty-seven, my father died from asthma and cardiac failure. My mother, née Doris Burton, born in 1889, came from Hull. Her parents had a printing business in Albany Road, Hull. She had one brother, Percy Charles Burton, who, as a second lieutenant with the East Yorkshire Regiment, was killed on active service in 1916 during the First World War. A few miles north of Hull, in Beverley Minster, there is a plaque commemorating those of the East Yorkshire Regiment who died in that war. His name appears on that plaque.

I believe my mother met my father while he was with the North Eastern Railway Company at the Dairycote Works, in Hull, prior to taking up a post at Percy Main.

Grandfather Charles Baister lived at 23 Queens Road, Jesmond, in Newcastle. He had two sons, Charles Norman, my father, Sydney Leonard, my uncle, and one daughter, my aunt, Gertrude. My grandfather must have lived with his parents in Darlington because in 1869 he was an apprentice at the North Road Railway Works in Darlington. During the Russo-Turkish War of 1887-1888 he was an engineer on a steamship that carried despatches through the Dardanelles to Constantinople, now Istanbul. He returned to the North Eastern Railway Company in 1882. He held various posts throughout the North East, eventually rising to Northern Divisional Superintendent. He held this post until he retired at the age of sixty-five in 1921, the year I was born. He died in 1934 at his home in Queens Road, Newcastle. His daughter Gertrude, who never married, cared for him as long as I can remember. What happened to his wife, my paternal grandmother, I have not been able to discover. My eldest sister Joyce thought she had died in a nursing home in Darlington, but from what cause and at what age remain a mystery, a mystery I may try and throw some light on at a later date.

Grandfather Baister must have been quite well off because he was able to provide both sons with a good education. Both my father and my uncle graduated from Durham University with a BSc degree in engineering.

My first clear memories start after the death of my father. His death must have caused some confusion because we had to vacate the railway company's house in St Johns Street. My sisters went to stay with Grandma Burton my maternal grandmother. She had a delightful cottage in Stamford Bridge, a peaceful village five miles east of York. The back garden bordered onto the gently flowing River Derwent. The cottage by the river could have been the setting for a Constable painting. The row of cottages was in a road that led to a narrow stone bridge. It crossed the Derwent, just downriver from where a weir which straddled it allowed the water to spill over in a controlled and almost musical rushing sound. I only visited my grandmother on two occasions. Perhaps I was too much of a handful for this gentle old lady. Even so I do recall a nice old neighbour who was adept at making whistles from the wood of a nearby tree. He could turn one out in a matter of minutes, including the finger holes. I was never there long enough for him to teach me how to play the instrument but I can remember him quietly playing a few haunting melodies.

How Grandma Burton came to live in Stamford Bridge, I do not know. Perhaps she and her husband moved there after retiring from the printing business.

*.continued from Page 6 . . .*

This is another part of the family history I have no knowledge of. I did not know Grandfather Burton and I do not know when or where he died. While my sisters went to Stamford Bridge I stayed with my mother in a house in Railway Street. It was just around the corner from St Johns Street and must have been a house that the Railway Company made available to my mother as a temporary measure. It was next door to a dear old lady called Mrs Fenwick. Mrs Fenwick, a widow, had someone staying with her who was to have a considerable effect on our lives. I remember a girl called Moira who would have been about fourteen calling at the house to take me out in the pushchair. (I think we called a pushchair a "go-cart".) She used to wheel me around to the small local shop in St Johns Street to buy odd items of shopping for my mother. On Sundays she took me to the local church, I can't recall its name, but I vividly remember crawling on my hands and knees under the pews while a frantic Moira desperately tried to recapture me. I must have been three and a half at this time. From Railway Street we moved to Hurworth Burn, an isolated place, five miles south of Darlington. There were only a handful of houses clustered near the railway station. I am not sure if the name of the station was Hurworth Burn or simply Hurworth. What influenced the railway company to bestow a station on such a remote place that didn't even seem large enough to call itself a village is difficult to comprehend. It may have been the fact that there was quite a large railway marshalling yard there. The brick built house, so close to the station, almost seemed to be part of it. It was so isolated it must have seemed like the last place on earth to my mother who had had a very comfortable life. She had even been able to afford a nursemaid to look after her three children when we lived in Percy Main.

Joyce, five years older than me, was school age and would have been attending a school, probably in Stamford Bridge. To the best of my knowledge there was no school in the vicinity of Hurworth Burn. I don't recall seeing even a shop anywhere near the house. It was quite likely a mobile shop called at the few houses from time to time. I distinctly recollect my youngest sister Margery and I having to walk about a mile and a half to buy fresh milk from a farmhouse. We used to take a quart sized enamelled can which, when full, cost two pennies. One morning, on our way home after buying the milk we were skylarking around and chasing each other when I tripped and spilled all the milk. A terrible fear seized us. We had no money to purchase more milk and we were afraid to return home empty handed. Perhaps subconsciously we were aware of the family difficulties. Eventually we plucked up courage and retraced our steps to the farmhouse. Timidly we explained to the farmer's wife that I had accidentally tripped and spilled the milk. She was not at all sympathetic and severely scolded us. However, she did, with reluctance, refill our can. It was with immense relief that we returned home. Perhaps the two pennies were just as important to the farmer's wife as they were to us. We never told our mother, but had we, I feel sure she would have been sympathetic. The house, which was another railway property, was, because of its remoteness, probably let to my mother at a nominal rent by the railway company. She had, at some time, attempted to work in the refreshment rooms at Stockton while Granny Burton tried to cope with us. This had not worked out. It might have been that I was too much of a handful for Granny Burton to cope with.

This house, in Hurworth Burn, had a large living room-cum-kitchen. On one side of the large open coal burning fire was a long black cast-iron kitchen range. Mother did most of the cooking on the range including the baking of all our bread. She would knead the dough into a big round lump and place it in a large enamel bowl and cover it with a clean cloth. It was then placed on the hearth where the heat from the fire caused the dough to rise. This fascinated me. I derived considerable pleasure from lifting up the cloth and poking my fingers deep into

the risen dough. The warm spongy dough gave me a feeling of comfort. It always puzzled me that there were never any holes in the finished loaves. I don't ever remember being told off for this prank, perhaps because I was never caught in the act. On the other side of the fire breast a large cupboard reached right up to the ceiling. It contained all manner of odd items that had been brought from Percy Main. In the bottom of the cupboard, Margery and I found two round black ebony rulers. They were the kind used by draughtsmen; they must have belonged to my father. We pushed one of them right into the fire. It immediately flared up like a firework and was consumed by the flames and reduced to ashes in a matter of minutes. It was quite a pleasing spectacle. The following day we were again rummaging in the cupboard and were astonished to discover there were still two rulers lying in the bottom. We looked at each other in disbelief. We did not dare tell anyone and for a number of days we were fearful that someone would notice one of the rulers was missing. Perhaps there had been three. The mystery of the burnt ruler is still vivid to both of us, almost as if it had occurred only yesterday.

At Christmas a group of hunters came by train to Hurworth Burn for a seasonal shoot. They were all dressed in the traditional clothing of the sport. They wore sheepskin jackets, heavy boots, gaiters and deer-stalker hats. Most of them must have been equipped with ample sized hip flasks because on their way back to the station they were all in a merry mood. They would call at our house to wish us a Merry Christmas and leave a couple of pheasants and sweets for the children.

In the winter, there were times when a nearby large pond became frozen and, from nowhere, people arrived to skate on the ice. On reflection, it was, to me, reminiscent of a scene from one of Pieter Bruegel's paintings of people skating on the frozen lakes in Holland. Where so many people appeared from is difficult to understand considering it was such a sparsely populated and outlandish place.

Our house had no front garden. The front door opened on to a roughish tarmac road that serviced the railway station. Directly opposite, on the other side of the road there was a ranch-type fence. It had an opening for access to a flight of steps leading down to the railway sidings, some fifteen or so feet below the road level. Freight wagons were shunted around this marshalling yard to their required positions. I had a habit of escaping from the house and wandering all over the sidings, which, fortunately, never seemed very busy. One day I took a short cut by ducking under and in between the wagons, instead of going round them, to get to the steps at the foot of the slope to the road above. On reaching the top I was confronted by a man who severely reprimanded me for doing such a dangerous and stupid thing. He then boxed my ears. It was the first encounter I can recall with the man who was to become my stepfather. In those days it was quite normal practice to castigate a child for doing something so silly, but it wasn't an ideal introduction to a new and delicate relationship. I cannot recall having seen him or meeting him in Percy Main. I believe he had been friendly with my father for a number of years. He was William Handley Smith, a signalman with the North Eastern Railway Company. It was probably the common involvement with the railway that led to his friendship with my father. I did learn that his father had died when he was very young and he had been brought up in a boys' home. His mother had had a guest house in Scarborough. He had one brother and two sisters who also lived in Scarborough but I never did meet any of his relations. He lived with old Mrs Fenwick in Railway Street, the same street to which we moved after my father died. . . . *to be continued.*



### **Continuing Michael Ken's Journal "Oceans Apart" . . .**

The returning tram deposited us at the station with just minutes to spare and as we settled into our seats, it was with relief and a feeling of satisfaction that at least we had seen the Vatican square. We were once again

about to continue on our way home via Paris at ten o'clock of the evening. It had been twenty-eight hours since we had eaten tea on the *'Koluxotronis,'* which had been our last meal.

Sleep proved elusive as we sped northward through the night passing through the sparsely populated Italian landscape as the hunger pains became more persistent. It was a relief that dawn allowed views of the pretty countryside, but it did little to distract the attention from our bellies.

I must have dozed off for I awoke to the definite smell of food. At first I thought that I was dreaming, but No! There in the corridor of the compartment was an attendant selling hot dogs from a tray. With us not being able to buy even one, the wafting aroma from his tray amounted to torture. It was then forty hours since we had eaten. As he departed, advertising his wares along the corridor, the smell of his sausages still tantalised my nostrils and taste buds, the hunger pains returned but lessened somewhat as we began a torturous climb through the mountains.

As the train struggled slowly up inclines and passes, I was glued to the windows, stunned by the magnificent vista of snow-clad mountains, glaciers and gullies. Scenery I had only dreamt about captivated my thoughts and attention even to the extent of forgetting my hunger, but not for long. My dreams were rudely interrupted by the return of the sausage man and the hunger pains returned worse than ever.

No scenery in the world could block out my need for foods and the smell of those sausages. Two ABs from the adjoining compartment were obviously in similar throes of hunger; they came into the corridor and attempted to cajole the sausage vendor to sell them a hot dog for what little lira they possessed. "No, No, I want more money" he kept repeating, till it developed into a slanging match and while one AB gesticulated madly, imitating the distraught sausage man and distracting his attention, the other AB discretely nicked a couple of sausages from the tray; that to me highlighted the things that man will do when he is hungry.

My fascination with the wonderful wintry mountain scene was abruptly broken by a rumbustious spasm in my long neglected gut. I dashed along the corridor to find the loo. That was my first encounter with continental railway toilets. There was just a round hole in the floor of the cubicle through which I could see the rail track fast receding. Previous occupants had not been too particular and, not to paint too bright a picture, it was critical where one placed one's feet. It was not a pleasant experience and it did nothing for my complaining stomach.

As I retraced my steps along the corridor, I bumped into one of the Arabs. He had obviously seen me as I had dashed past his compartment towards the loo and was waiting in the corridor for me to return. He smiled and said "Hello." Smiling back, "How are you doing?" I asked. He did not reply but silently reached under his jumper and produced a large packet of biscuits. "For you, but you must not give to any ABs" he said. It was manna from heaven!

"Hide them" he said, as he slid them under my jumper. He had realised how desperately hungry I must be. His generosity overwhelmed me and for a moment I was speechless, not only for his

kindness but for his thought and consideration for a seventeen year old boy and a fellow human being. I wondered if my own nationality shipmates would have been so considerate if they had food. I thanked him profusely, but he brushed my thanks aside and repeated his request for me not to give to any ABs.

I pushed the biscuits under my jumper around to my side to hide their bulk with my arm in order to keep them from the view of the ABs in our carriage, and I returned to my seat. With great difficulty I restrained my desire for a few minutes to get at what was to be the first food that had passed my lips for two days, and I pondered on how to eat them away from prying eyes. As hungry as I was, I certainly didn't want to eat them in the loo compartment.

"Let's stretch our legs," I said to Jim after a while, and we walked in the opposite direction to the toilets. Unexpectedly we came upon a carriage that was empty, and I ushered Jim into it to sit down. "I thought you wanted to stretch your legs" he said. The expression on Jim's face was one of disbelief as I produced the packet of biscuits. Only on opening the packet did we find a bonus; they were chocolate biscuits. "Where did they come from?" he queried amazed. "Ask no questions" I replied as we wolfed them down. I thought it was the most wonderful meal of my life and I have loved chocolate biscuits ever since. Jim was just a few months older than me and also an ordinary seaman, not an AB, so I felt that I had not broken my pledge to my generous Arab by sharing them with him.

Exactly twenty-four hours after leaving Rome, we ran into the Gare de Lyon Paris. It was 10.00pm, and the train to Dieppe was not due to leave until 6.00am. The Parisian railway officials were much more considerate than their Italian counterparts, and we were allowed to sleep in the second class waiting room. On the stroke of 6.00am the Dieppe bound express left the station. As it pulled away smoothly and without any hassle I reflected, with a little disappointment, that my first visit to Paris had consisted of sleeping in a railway waiting room.

The journey was fast and uneventful in comparison to the previous ones and two hours later, on the stroke of 8.00pm, we pulled into Dieppe docks. A short walk then found us on the quay and boarding the cross channel ferry *'SS Worthing.'*

Within an hour we were Blighty bound, and within a further two and a half hours the ferry had tied up at Newhaven. I felt a great sense of relief when I set foot back on English soil, but still there was no food. Customs official were as cooperative and helpful as usual for it was more than one and a half hours before we took our seats on the London Train.

The Fourth Engineer had advised the company office of our estimated time of arrival, and had arranged for the company representative to meet the train. It was six o'clock early evening when we finally arrived at Waterloo to find there was no company rep. Yet again tempers within the group started to get a little edgy, and my stomach began to complain again. Another hour went by and still no representative had appeared. The Fourth Engineer once again rang the company office thinking it would be a fruitless task given the time of day. He was most surprised to find that someone was still on duty, and he was informed that a representative had indeed left the office three hours previously to meet the train. We next heard the station announcer asking over the tannoy system if any representatives from the Counties Management Shipping Company were anywhere on the station then they should report to the Station Master's Office.

. . . .continued Page 9

*continued from Page 8 . . .* Shortly after, as if by magic they appeared. They had awaited our arrival at the wrong platform. We were then informed that they proposed to pay each man ten pounds and the remainder of our money would be forwarded by post to our homes. That went down like a lead balloon and created a rumpus. I was not too disturbed though as I reckoned I had very little more than that to come anyway in accrued wages. Eventually my shipmates realised that it was a 'fait accompli' so the money and the discharge documents were issued to everyone, and we all dispersed to go our separate ways with little or no goodbyes.

Jim, Alf and I decided that our stomachs could not endure starvation any longer and quelled the pangs of hunger in a nearby café. I said goodbye to my two friends and took the underground to Euston and before too long I was comfortably on my way to Birmingham where I arrived at New Street at three o'clock in the morning.

I never understood why the taxi driver was reluctant to take me to my home; it would have only taken an extra few minutes, but he would only agree to take me to Walsall, which meant I had to walk the last three miles or so.

Walsall in the early hours of the morning is not to be recommended. It was like a ghost town, not a soul to be seen as I paid off the surly taxi driver and began to walk. Halfway home a policeman appeared from nowhere. His torch wandered all over me as he asked who I was and what I had got in my cases. "This," I thought, "was great". It had taken almost a week to travel home from Greece and now a couple of miles from home I'm being arrested on suspicion," but after examining my discharge papers, the policeman's attitude changed, and he let me go on my way. I still wonder that maybe he thought I had been looting Woolworth's.

I was tired and worn out by the time I arrived home, and I was literally on my knees. Given that the company granted one day paid leave for every month in their employ plus one day for every Sunday spent at sea, I was due for nine days at home.

And so ended my first adventure at sea. I had seen a lot I had learned a lot and I knew what it was like to feel real hunger. I never thought that seamen could be left to fend for themselves as we had been on our overland journey from Greece. But I was young and I had come to no harm.

What is a little hunger when I had seen such wondrous sights and places that I had never in my wildest dreams expected to see. Despite all the hardships and hunger, ironically it had whetted my appetite.

### ***Oceans Apart Chapter 3.***

#### ***(Of meeting a School Mate, Mosquito Repellent and a Jellyfish)***

Food, food, food. The privacy of my own room. A comfortable bed that maintained an even keel and no one to shake me awake at unearthly hours. That was the bliss in which I wallowed for nine glorious days. My mother's good, wholesome, home fare, plentiful and tasty, pushed my recent experiences into the realms of a bad dream.

I spared my mother the nightmares and the bad bits as I related to her my experiences and described the places that I had visited; she then seemed more at ease with my new job and not quite so worried. It was at her suggestion that I decided to keep a log of all my travels, and I resolved to keep the journal on a daily basis as much as possible. I allotted a monthly allowance of money to my mother, which she banked for me as she did not expect me to make a contribution to the family budget when I was away at

sea. My allowance was put away for me with the intention that it would provide a nest egg for me.

My time on leave was spent looking up my old mates, and I spent the evenings visiting old haunts and renewing acquaintances. I found it extremely amusing to hear their repeated questions; "How long are you home for?" and "When are you going back?" I'm sure my friends were genuinely interested and not only interested in how soon they would be seeing the back of me again. The days flew by and then one morning the letter came that recalled me back to Liverpool. I was to report to the Pool on the 14th April 1954; it was with a returning sense of excitement that I packed my bags on the night of the 13<sup>th</sup>. I said my goodbyes, and as the bus took me to Wolverhampton for the Liverpool train, I wondered again where I was bound that time, and what awaited me.

After the ticket collector at the gate had clipped my ticket, I turned onto the platform and came face to face with the Wolverhampton lad, Mick, who had been those few weeks behind me at the training school. He had completed his training, and he too went off to Liverpool to join his first ship. We got on well together, and as the journey progressed, he continually questioned me about my first trip and hung on to every word as I related the details of my first encounter with the world of the sea.

I enjoyed having his company on the journey, and on our arrival at Lime Street station I led him to the Pool office and showed him the ropes. After all, I was an old hand. The office was virtually empty and the clerk directed me to the Union Office and then turned his attention to Mick.

After I had paid my dues and with my membership card duly stamped, the clerk then pointed me in the direction of the doctor. It had only been a few weeks since my last medical and as I presented myself in the surgery, I saw Mick coming out. I asked him to wait for me before he returned to the counter.

Despite my recent medical, I had another thorough going over before I was given the all clear to report once again to the Pool clerks. As the clerk busied himself with official looking documents at the counter, I asked him if Mick and I could both sign on the same ship. "I don't see why not" he cheerfully responded, "Yes, the ***San Velino*** of the Eagle Oil and Shipping Company. She is a tanker, signing on tomorrow morning aboard ship. She's docked in Birkenhead", and as he returned our documents to us, he explained how to get there. As we left the office I was chatting excitedly to Mick when someone bumped into me in the doorway. "My god! Don't tell me you've come back for more?" It was an AB from the ***Oakhill***. "You're a glutton for punishment" he joked as we laughed with each other. He was probably right, maybe I was a glutton for punishment, but looking back it had all been one big adventure for a naïve, inexperienced, seventeen year old Midland lad. "All the lads from the ***Oakhill*** had lodged a complaint on their return to Liverpool" he told me, and suggested that I should go round to the Union Office as there may be something for me. "I have only just had my book stamped this morning," I said. "Well go back and tell them that you were on the ***Oakhill***, you might get a pleasant surprise." he called as he disappeared into the office. Mick tagged along and we made our way once again to confront the union official. "You again," he said as I walked in, "What is it this time?" He listened to my tale then disappeared into a back room and returned with an envelope addressed to me. It contained seven pound ten shillings (£7.50) "I was rich, I had struck gold" I thought as I thanked him. Mick and I then made our way back to Gordon Smith's to book a room. With our gear safely stored in our rooms, it was time for a meal.

*..... to be continued*

## When Harry Came Home

Harry Porten is newsletter editor for the Auckland Vindicatrix Association and we first made contact when I sent him a copy of the Masthead. We now correspond by email regularly and Harry sends me copies of their newsletter as they come off the press. Initially we swapped memories of the Auckland I knew back in the 1950s when Sly Grogging was still a going concern at Ma Gleasons when the NZ licensing laws at the time required thirsty revelers to vacate the bars at 6pm. They then loaded the boot of their cars with crates of ale and went off partying at pre arranged houses. We also reminisced about Aunt Daisy, the early morning radio announcer who memorably once started her programmed with "Good Morning Auckland. It's a fine sunny day and the sun is shining right up my back passage."

Progress has naturally changed the face of the Auckland most of us remember, but nothing can change the friendliness of the people who still probably refer to England as "Home".

Over now to Harry with his recent article on he and his wife's visit to England. . . .

### *Some Notes From Abroad*

My wife and I have been fortunate enough to have recently enjoyed an extended trip abroad. After a few nights in Hong Kong we then spent a few magical days in Madrid before making our way down to the Costa Blanca and the Costa del Sol where we stayed with friends.

Madrid is the real Spain. Full of beautiful buildings, beautiful Plazas, much Olde Worlde charm and culture. To be in Southern Spain was akin to being in any kind of English seaside town. Even the sun barely shone while we were there. The building boom that prevailed until the last recession, produced street after street of affordable homes and apartments. Many were bought by English folk. The Plaza/Malls that service the area are full of cafes, restaurants and pubs mostly owned by English expatriates and almost exclusively patronised by them. There you can buy your "full English" (All Day) breakfasts and your English Sunday roasts. These places are full of English folk supping their pints of Tetley's and watching Manchester United on the large flat screen TVs situated at either end of the bar.

If you can tear one of these guys away from the telly long enough to talk a little you'll learn that they have no Spanish friends, most have never attempted to learn the Spanish language and I never met even one who had ever visited Madrid. But . . . C'est la vie! Each to his own.

From the Costa Blanca we flew to Edinburgh. We wore our winter clothes ( it was the end of April) but that was a mistake. The sun was out and shining down fiercely. Sitting in my friends' back yard drinking beer we were wearing straw hats to fend off the sun. Who could have believed it?

Edinburgh , Auld Reekie, is dominated by the Castle where they say there's been a fortress of some kind since time immemorial. We browsed the posh and not so posh shops of Princes Street stepping over the stretched legs of bearded beggars as they shook their tins at us.

I entered the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) to cash some left-over Euros into local money only to be told "It's not possible sir, unless you have an account with us." Can you believe that? An international bank that won't change money! I changed it at the Money Exchange in Sainsbury's supermarket. I got a good rate too, only it was all in Scottish tens and twenties that would provide some fun later on, south of the border.

We left for the Midlands by rental car breaking the journey by staying overnight with Cousin Jon at Barnsley who took us out to

dinner at an ancient country pub complete with timber frame and thatched roof. We'd see many more of these before long. It was roast pork and apple sauce and big pints of cider.

Staying with old shipmate Barry in Warwickshire was a thrill. He soon organised it so we were back on board ship, albeit a narrow boat on the Avon River at Stratford. No salty tang or pitching peak here, just a gently nosing along. We were served chicken breast with new potatoes. The boat was low in the water and we had eye-level views of the moorhens, coots and kingfishers as they went about their busy lives. We graciously gave the royal wave to the peons in the river bank as they gawped at our silver forks and stiff white linen tablecloths as we glided by.

I was fortunate enough to be able to attend a school reunion. This was also held in a remote village pub with the customary low beams and stone floor and traditional English menu consisting of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, enormous portions of cod and chips and so on.

We couldn't hold the reunion at the school as, despite the school being founded in 1400, it had been closed some forty years ago, hence the village pub venue. It was fun to ask the various guests "and who did you used to be"? A wonderful time was had by all.

It was quite a shock to drive around my old home county of Leicestershire. The city had one way street where before there was two way access. There were tunnels and roundabouts where there had been none before; with new roads leading off them to goodness knows where. And what about the roundabouts with traffic lights at them? I thought roundabouts were an alternative to traffic lights. Then there were the *four* lane roundabouts! God help you if you got in the wrong lane, you'd be going round and round for ever!

I couldn't get over how much I enjoyed driving around the lanes and by-ways of the old place considering that when I lived there I couldn't get out of the place quick enough. I suppose it's what you call nostalgia. And on to London, There was no rental car for me here. I'd been down that road before and just about had a nervous breakdown trying to find my way around the great Metropolis. We stayed with cousins in the East End, not far from where the Royal Docks used to be. My cousin asked, "I believe you'd like to see the Royal Docks, Harry. "Yes, please". He drove me to what was once Victoria Dock. There's nothing there but acres of new concrete and flyovers and of course the bizarre spectacle of aircraft taking off and landing way over the other side. No sign of any warehouses or cranes. It was always the forest of cranes that defined where your docks were. There's nothing like that there now.

We drove all around the area, I couldn't get my bearings. I told Cousin Chris I wanted to see the old Roundhouse pub but I couldn't direct him to it.

We saw the Tate and Lyle factory and that was about the only familiar thing I could find. Coming back on the Woolwich Ferry was also weird. Everything was many times bigger and the berthing arrangements so different to what they were. The passengers have quite a walk when coming and going and they're not too pleased about it. The ferry is free so I guess they can't complain.

We caught a Thames Clipper commuter boat at Canary Wharf for a trip up the Thames to the London Eye. They say the Thames has been cleaned up, I'm glad they told me as I'd never have known. The murky dark brown waters were as soupy as I ever remembered them.

. . . continued page 11.

**Continued from page 10. . .** It was nice to travel on the river boat and under the bridges including Tower Bridge and see many of the sights of London like the Tower and HMS Belfast.

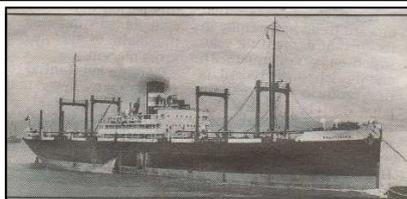
We bought our £15 tickets to the London Eye and joined the endless queue that shuffled forward in organised slow motion. Before boarding, everyone was frisked with the security man's magic wand, no chances taken here. The giant wheel never actually stops. It circulates so slowly the attendants can get people on and off while it's still in motion. The complete circle takes just over half an hour.

On leaving London we headed for Vancouver which was to be our last port of call. The city was gripped by the "Stanley Cup" fever. The premier North American ice hockey prize. Thousands of cars were getting around bedecked with "Vancouver Canucks Go" team flags and graffiti was everywhere proclaiming "Go Canucks Go". They were part way through the best of seven games with their arch rivals the "Boston Bruins". While staying there we managed a ferry trip to Victoria on Vancouver Island. This was more like it.

We boarded a real ship for the 1½ hour voyage. How Captain George Vancouver was able to map the islands, straits, inlets and rivers of that maritime maze of geographical puzzles I'll never know. Most stretches of water were dotted with islands large and small, heavily frosted down to the waters edge. Many islands had holiday homes along their waterfronts but I saw little evidence of holiday makers yet the weather was fine. There were a few leisure boats in evidence there. Vancouver and Vancouver Island seem to have several ports dotted around the region, not just one main port. Container ships and bulk carriers were coming and going this way and that. It was nice to stand on the top deck and smell the salt and feel the wind in my face.

After six games the Canucks and Bruins were 3-all. Then the unthinkable happened, the Bruins won the last game. Riots and car burnings ensued in Vancouver. Celtic and Rangers fans don't have the monopoly on it !

**Harry Porten**



Seventy years ago the Liverpool steamer **SS "Politician"** ( T & J Harrison ) was wrecked on the isle of Eriskay off the Scottish coast. Her cargo

was mainly whiskey, man cases of which were 'rescued' by local islanders provoking a war between themselves and the Customs & Excise people. A novel by Sir Compton MacKenzie based on the event was turned into a film called "Whisky Galore".

#### CHAPLAIN.

King William 3<sup>rd</sup> charter of 1698 required the Company to carry a chaplain on board any ship of 500 tons or over. Similar provisions appeared in Queen Anne's charter of 1702. This was overcome by registering all ships from 1708 to 1747 at under 500 tons. The highest rated was 498 tons.

#### Taking the Biscuits

Merchant Shipping Act of 1844 laid down that a seaman was entitled to as many hard biscuits as he could eat, without waste, up to a limit of 1lb a day,

#### BREAKING UP

A poignant photograph of HMS Invincible being broken up for scrap in a Turkish port prompted Commander John Muxworthy to write an accompanying article on the sad decline of our Royal Navy.

Notably there were no tears of regret from the great and the good when our merchant ships went to the breakers, also in foreign ports. The only registered regret came from merchant seamen who also lost their livelihood and their careers. And their future.

#### A VERY IMPORTANT ISSUE

**Following the disappointing numbers at the 2011 AGM and Luncheon, our President/Gen.Sec asks "Where Are We Going Wrong." In reply Ian Warren sent in the following observation. The views of our other members would be very much appreciated as John works very hard to organise this important event.**

Ian writes;

Dear Gordon,

Regarding the AGM for next year, it is always going to be difficult (to resolve) for a variety of reasons. Some members probably can't travel far, for others it is the cost element and, as you say, some are still working. As I work for myself I generally find that I can be working 7 days a week, although I can obviously take time off if I want. However, as a new business not yet making much profit, I have to take into account the cost of attending anything these days, for instance from here to Gravesend and back would be £55 for petrol alone.

The old saying that you can't please all the people all of the time has never been truer. The only suggestions I can think of are: - Hold it at a weekend to help those who still work, and it could be that public transport and accommodation is cheaper than in the week. Consider alternating the venue each year, so it doesn't always favour those living in the South. Perhaps hold it in Manchester next year, and then Springbok the year after. Perhaps more would go if they could share transport, but no-one really knows where any of the other members live. Perhaps you could ask in the next newsletter for people who would be prepared to drive others, and share petrol costs. It might not be viable because of where people live, but perhaps worth a thought.

If I think of anything else I will let you know.

Best regards.

**Ian (Warren)**

#### A teacher at a polytechnic college reminded her pupils of tomorrow's final exam.

**'Now listen to me, I won't tolerate any excuses for you not being here tomorrow. I might consider a nuclear attack or a serious personal injury, illness, or a death in your immediate family, but that's it, no other excuses whatsoever!'**

**A smart-arsed guy at the back of the room raised his hand and asked,**

**'What would happen if I came in tomorrow suffering from complete and utter sexual exhaustion?'**

**The entire class was reduced to laughter and sniggering. When silence was restored, the teacher smiled knowingly at the student, shook her head and sweetly said, 'Well, I suppose you'd have to write with your other hand'.**

### Furness Bermuda Line Reunion 2011

Readers may remember the item in the March Masthead advertising the second biennial reunion of crewmembers from the cruise ships Queen of Bermuda and Ocean Monarch, which was to take place at Springbok Farm in May. I am pleased to report that the event was a great success, with around ninety people from several parts of the world attending for a weekend of meeting old shipmates, renewing friendships, lectures, socialising and generally having a good time. An informal get-together of early arrivals was held in the bar on Friday evening and a full day of activities began the following morning. The day was ably conducted by Master of Ceremonies Alva James, who had been a purser on both vessels. After running through what was in store for us and introducing speakers, he invited all those who had served on QoB and OM to introduce themselves, allowing each person just one minute to give a potted history of their time on the ships and what has happened to them since.

I was there as a guest (listed as a Supernumary) and for outsiders like myself this exercise was an eye-opener. These 'just-a-minute' accounts were delivered with varying degrees of feeling, wit, humour and, in some cases, emotion. What was obvious was that these two ships provided their happiest days at sea for many of those present.

Company men (officers, cadets and the like) were occasionally transferred to other ships and companies in the Furness fleet and mention of these, e.g. Shaw Savill, Prince Line, the ships Sagamore, Southern ('Suffering') Cross, Andes and the unlamented Dominion Monarch was greeted with groans of derision. They couldn't wait to get back to the Queen or Monarch. Whether this was to get back to their old shipmates, or what appeared to be an endless (and fresh every week) supply of nubile – and sometimes wealthy – young American lady passengers was not actually mentioned. In the case of the latter, I was given to understand that the non-fraternisation rule was easily got round when the ships arrived in Bermuda. However, what was clear was that these two ships engendered a feeling of family and camaraderie that their crews experienced on no other ship.

When the New York-Bermuda service ended in the early 70s, it was like the break-up of a big, happy home and more than one of those I spoke to were unable to settle on any other ship and gave up the sea. There was, though, life after the Queen and Monarch, both at sea and ashore, as evidenced by the presence of retired masters, marine and engineering superintendents, radio officers and those who had been successful in a wide range of later careers unconnected with the sea.

One of the highlights of this session was a live, internet 'interview' with one of our own GSS members, Ian Bray, who now lives on a boat in Auckland NZ harbour. I believe he came to the first Furness Bermuda Line reunion two years ago but was unable to make it this year. The link was via webcam, so we could see Ian, and he us, in an amusing and entertaining exchange.

Coffee was followed by the first speaker of the day, the marine artist Stephen Card, who talked about his career as a seaman and self-taught artist. Stephen was born in Bermuda and had an early fascination with ships and the sea. (A sign of kinder, more relaxed times: as a boy he could just walk into the harbourmaster's office in Hamilton and obtain a pass to wander aboard the ships in the port.) He came to Britain and became a navigation apprentice with Denholm's, in due course obtaining his master's ticket.

Stephen returned to Bermuda and landed the job of harbourmaster in Hamilton, but after a couple of years he was thinking of returning to sea. At this point he was persuaded to take his art seriously and, to cut a long story short, he did so and became a success. He is deservedly world-renowned and has been commissioned by several major shipping companies to produce paintings of their ships, including Holland-America and Cunard Lines. His fine paintings, detailed and carefully researched, grace the bulk-

heads on the QE2, among others. Stephen was kind enough to sign a page in my copy of the book *Liners in Art*, in which several of his paintings appear. He told me that he now spends much of his time lecturing on cruise ships. As they say, 'it's a tough life but, dammit, someone has to do it!'

An enjoyable buffet lunch was followed by the taking of group photographs and afterwards by informative and entertaining talks, illustrated with photographs, by Allen Soares and Allan Davidson. We saw pictures of Bermuda, ships, crew members and social occasions connected with the Queen and the Monarch down the years, with great amusement and some ribald comment at crew photos from the 50s and 60s. Alas, those Tony Curtis hair styles and athletic figures are long gone!

Some of the colour photographs showed the floodlit funnels of the Queen and Monarch and there was agreement that these were the finest of any. Well, sorry chaps, but, while I might be accused of bias, I think that Houlder's white Maltese Cross was a finer sight by floodlight. Having said that however, neither was as impressive under floodlight, I think, as Blue Star's.

Time to view mementos and souvenirs brought along by shipmates and laid out in the library followed, and pre-dinner drinks were later enjoyed in the bar. At dinner I shared a table with one of our own GSS members, Doug Hansell from Kings Lynn, Donald Cameron from Scotland who settled in New Jersey – both in the Catering Department on the Queen – and Brian Walker from North Shields who served in the engine room on both ships.

A raffle was held during dinner and from a selection of worthwhile prizes yours truly won a signed copy of Tommy Steele's autobiography, *Bermundsey Boy*, (much to the envy of our President, John Meadowcroft, who'll never let me forget my luck!). Tommy Steele – still, of course, known as Hicks when he was at the Gravesend Sea School – was a steward on the Queen of Bermuda and is a member of our GSS Association.

After dinner, speeches were made during which Peter Manley, one of the organisers of the event and a GSS member, announced that a vote would now be taken among the ex-crew members present to agree to the formation of a Furness Bermuda Line Association. The motion was carried unanimously and further news of this new association is due to appear on the Furness Bermuda Line website in due course. If you visit the [furnessbermudaline.com](http://furnessbermudaline.com) site you will now be able to view photographs and video recorded on the day.

We were also each kindly presented with a print of Stephen Card's painting of the Queen of Bermuda sailing among the islands of Bermuda. It has been signed by Allen Soares, who was in the Catering Department on the Queen and now lives in Bermuda.

This was the point at which I had to end a most enjoyable day and head for home. Some of those from further afield, staying at Springbok and others in hotels around the area, stayed on to take advantage of the late night closing of the Springbok bar. The weekend ended for them at noon the next day.

As I mentioned earlier, the gathering included people from around the UK and many parts of the world, including Belgium, South Africa, Canada, USA and of course Bermuda.

I would like to thank in particular Peter Manley and Bill Cox, who both organised the event, for allowing me to attend. It was a privilege and a most informative and enjoyable day. I know that the members of the Gravesend Sea School Association will join me in wishing them and all their old shipmates the best of luck with the formation of the Furness Bermuda Line Association and future reunions.

David Svensen

***Furness house flag and the flag of Bermuda flown at Springbok***



## "Barnacle Bill" Backshall's Page

### Patch Work



Between voyages I took employment in the Liverpool shore gangs, for my elderly parents were ailing somewhat. My father was the most honest, loyal and sincere man I have ever known and I say that knowing we might look through rose tinted glasses at our own kin. He was also the worlds worst carpenter, evidenced by the frighteningly ramshackle pigeon lofts, hen sheds, and greenhouses etc he attempted to build.

One day he said "Bill, my old chum Sammy is not in the best of health lately, and wants to sell his partly converted steel lifeboat shored up at the Gladstone dock. Its originally off your old vessel the "Heinakura", why not go and buy the thing?". So I did just that, and in doing so befriended Sammy. With him being an older, married, conscientious man, and though he never passed judgement, I sensed he was disappointed with my irresponsibility, quitting jobs off hand, drinking with old shipmates, resenting authority etc, single mans stuff like that.

The cabin Sammy had been erecting on the boat looked absolutely dreadful, a square box resembling a hen shed capped with a terrace house pitched roof. I honestly wondered if my father had been called in as the marine architect. Dismantling it, I rebuilt things with a nice camber to the decks, streamlined the cabin and wheelhouse to follow the pleasing lines of the hull, raked aft and perpendicular faces making her look quite a smart craft. Serving a few years as an apprentice joiner before my deck hands training at Gravesend certainly helped matters. Being a 'dumb' lifeboat, provision now had to be made for an engine to be shipped, but firstly a stern tube needed to be fitted and this entailed hack sawing through the stern post. Luckily, a coppersmith who bought a neighbouring craft obliged me by welding the stern tube in place. My next task was to make this job watertight by building up a large bulbous patch around the welded area with successive coats of fibreglass, and just on completion of this messy, tricky business, a vehicle's arrival heralded my old pal Sammy the original owner, obviously still interested in his craft. "I've come to see what sort of a mess your making of the boat ,Bill!" he joked as we shook hands, and though he made no further comment, I felt he approved of the progress. Then, after inspecting the impressive patch around the stern tube, he straightened up gasping rather than breathing normally for air. Sadly, old age as well as poor health was fast catching him up. His blue eyes stared at me thoughtfully for quite a few seconds, then head shaking slowly, he decided it was time to trim my vents. "Bill" he said, then pausing for two more breaths, "Bill, I must admit you can put a patch on the stern end of a boat O.K, but in all honesty you'll never be a patch on your old fellahs arse!!"

I got his drift all right. He rightly valued my fathers integrity, loyalty, and sincerity far more than my fancy carpentry.

B.B

### Rough Passage

A quick peck on the cheek as Ma wished me "Goodbye" and humping my sea bag I made my way through the morning rain to Seaforth station and the old Overhead railway 60 years ago. I was re-joining the SS John Holt for a 3-4 month voyage to the West Coast of Africa as a deck hand. Not the healthiest nor most glamorous of trips, in fact the coast was once known as "The White Man's Grave" so the shipping lines, to encourage the crew's loyalty, gave each man his own tiny cabin plus 10% atop his wages by way of an inducement.

First though, I needed to get to the Queens dock to join her, and boarding the three wooden coached train at Seaforth during the early morning peak hour, I prepared myself mentally and physically for a rough ride. The train soon filled to capacity with every type of rain drenched tradesmen, stevedores, porters, lady cleaners, office workers, seamen etc with quite a number carrying various pieces of marine related equipment. Machinery, ropes, painting gear, cleaning gear, tool boxes; large wooden patterns, instruments, anything portable and mostly under repair, all were dragged into the coach disregarding the comfort of the already sardine packed passengers, each person determined to get to their own particular destination. Soon the visibility was down to a few feet with the thick haze of tobacco smoke making station identification difficult. If the "No Smoking" signs had been written in Swahili they couldn't have been more disregard. As quickly as some folk fought their way off the train, others, similarly burdened stormed aboard, "Tons of room here" would be the shout, as they charged the doorways, with the patient folk jammed at the back giving ground as wooden patterns and tool boxes were used as battering rams. The wooden coaches heavily laden, would creak and groan like a sailing ship in heavy weather as they lurched and tilted dangerously at certain bends in the track, or when speeding alarmingly as the train careered downwards at the low end of Bramley Moore Dock.

Unable to see the station titles through the muggy atmosphere and choking blue smoke, men with window berths call helpfully the names at each stop "Gladstone", "Canada", "Sandon", "Wapping", Toxteth; lovely names, as good as the vessels titles in those docks. "Samaria", "Empress of Britain", "Aquitania", "Automedon" etc.

Finally reaching the 'Brunswick' station, I gratefully struggled my gear onto the platform and recognised a shipmate along the platform, also alighting. We gave one another the thumbs up, and relieved we sniggered and quoted the old sailors head-shaking remark, "Well, that's the worst of the trip over!"

B.B

### SLOP CHEST

We have for sale: Blazer Badges £10.50



Lapel Badges £2. 50



Association Ties £7.50

All prices include post and packaging. We can also provide a CD containing large selection of photos taken at the Dedication Service, which include two short film excerpts, photos of the Old School, and a few photos of the newer College. Price £1.50 inc. p&p Contact President & Gen/Sec J D Meadowcroft to buy any items. Phone: 01403 753525 Email: [jdmeadowcroft@tiscali.com](mailto:jdmeadowcroft@tiscali.com)

"School for Seamen" - a history of the Gravesend Sea School by Roy Derham MBE

We now have a limited number of copies of the Stewards Handbook for sale by Instructors E. Plum and F. Traynor. Available at £4 per copy.

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