

STEAMSHIP

FRESHSPRING

SOCIETY

FRESHSPRING NEWS



Summer 2015

Preserving the past to inspire knowledge for the future

Chairman's Letter

Your Trustees have been very active since the last edition of *Freshspring News*, primarily with the creation of documents to submit an application to The Heritage Lottery for the restoration of *SS Freshspring*, to support our work in education and to engage the public with our maritime heritage. The funds required for the project are in excess of £3.5 million with 70% to restore the ship and the balance to fund education and access. The Trust has a substantial business plan, which highlights that once in operation as a small cruise ship, *SS Freshspring* will be sustainable. In addition, providing funds to ensure education remains a high priority.

The Trust is working with an increasing number of Partners due to the tireless work of Trustees. We recently had a successful meeting with The University of West of England, a meeting facilitated by our newest Trustee, Graham Mimms, who, as soon as he was appointed, jumped straight into the deep end. The outcome is that we are likely to work closely with the University on a range of projects from ship layout, design, business studies and education focusing on primary age children and graduates from the University who are about to embark on their careers. As funds become available, we will engage with the University on a Knowledge Transfer scheme where a Graduate is allocated to the Trust for two years with the full academic support of the University. The cost of this is shared with two-thirds paid by the Government and one-third paid by the Trust.



The Chairman, John Puddy, out earlier this year promoting the SS Freshspring.

Trustees are increasing activity in Bideford, North Devon as the local authority has offered long term berthing for *SS Freshspring*. The aim now being to raise our profile. Talks have been given at The Federation of Small Businesses, Rotary and other venues. The Trust has engaged with local Sea Cadets, which has a remarkable 43 active cadets. This will bring enthusiastic youth into the project. We have also set up a collaborative partnership with WINGS, a substantial local charity which helps young people with skills and the self esteem required to enter rewarding employment. Surprisingly Bideford is an area of high depredation with the lowest per capita income in the UK.

Lord Attlee, the Trust Patron, and Lady Attlee visited Bideford for three days recently and met a range of influential people, including Councillors, WINGS, Sea Cadets and Babcock who operate Appledore Shipbuilders. There was a valuable opportunity for the Press to meet Lord Attlee along with a group of officials at his hotel, to discuss and learn more about the moving of the ship to Bideford and the educational aims of the project. This was a substantial benefit to the Trust in raising profile for the future.

Further afield, Trustees have attended the Steamboat Association AGM, the South West Ship Show in Bristol and met with The Merchant Navy Association to create collaboration. Trustees have engaged with Maritime Skills Alliance. The alliance aims to use a network of historic ships such as the *SS Freshspring*, the *MV Fountain* and *MV Coronía* to provide very good opportunities to enthuse the next generation of seafarers as well as giving the opportunity for practical seamanship training. This will feed into the Maritime Skills Alliance suite of training routes. Our work continues with The National Maritime Development Group to spread the word about opportunities that exist for young people in the maritime sector.

Due to the additional pressure created by the development of the Trust, new Trustees are joining the board from the South West region and Trustees are considering setting up an executive committee to bring professional skills to support Trustees.

There are many exciting and quite challenging (if you like challenge) volunteering opportunities within the Trust, so please make contact if you feel you could take a role in making this project a success, from preserving a steamship, to business management, to supporting career opportunities for young people.

Members can request copies of budgets and business plans, ideally by email. If you would like to speak to us, please call myself or any other Trustee at any time, when we can discuss opportunities.

John Puddy

COVER PICTURE: *A fine shot of Freshspring during her service days with the Admiralty. It is our goal to see her out on the open water steaming along as here. Let's make it happen!*

From the Secretary

I write this having just got back from another whole day out to have a meeting with John Puddy and John Austin (Trustee). This time it was to discuss the options currently available to us for the conservation and restoration of *SS Freshspring*. It seems that over the past year or so I have spent quite a bit of time in and out of meetings relating to *SS Freshspring*, much of the past few months being taken up with work on our Heritage Lottery Fund bid, which is currently with our advisers for refining before being submitted. Quite often I'd much rather be working on one of the engines or the boiler of the ship, but the planning and preparation work we are currently doing is equally, if not more, important to make sure we get it right first time, identifying any potential problems before they occur and keep considering alternative ways of conserving *SS Freshspring*, should one route not come to fruition. In fact for a break, I think I'll go onboard tomorrow and do some work on preparing the boiler for it's inspection.

Thank you to all who could attend our AGM a couple of months ago, and especially to Wendy for volunteering to take over the Treasurer's role. It was great to meet with you and I hope you enjoyed your trip to *SS Freshspring* to view the progress made over the past twelve months. We will be taking part in Heritage Open Days on Sunday 13th September 2015, so if you were not able to come and see us at the AGM, there is this opportunity later on in the year.

Don't forget that you can keep up to date with our works by 'liking us' on Facebook or by looking at the blog on our freshly renovated website at www.ssfreshspring.co.uk.

Stephen Attenborough

From the Treasurer

At the last AGM, when I was asked to take on the role of Treasurer to the Society, to say I had no idea quite what was involved is a slight understatement. Stephen Attenborough (Secretary) has done an excellent job keeping banking spreadsheets and submitting accounts to the Charity Commission for the past two years, but now that things are potentially moving up a gear or three, it had been thought that an accounting package specifically designed for charities to use should be purchased.

Enter 'Paxton'. With the patient help of a kind neighbour, Dick Glover, who has considerable IT and accounting experience, I have been cross-checking and updating all the data, which had been input into the package with the information provided by Stephen, Brian Gooding (Membership Secretary) Judy & John Richards and John Puddy. We now have data input into Paxton that corresponds exactly to the bank statements which we are delighted with.

As the project progresses, the Trust will, we hope, be managing very large sums of money, which have to be allocated and accounted for at all times. It is essential

that we prepare for this and your Trustees are wise to create a system now, which can operate efficiently in the future as the activities of the Trust progressively become more complex. In addition, Trustees require accurate monthly information on income and expenditure to ensure the project remains within budget.

Our next tasks are to match the data input into Paxton with the end of year submissions to the Charity Commission and the Gift Aid Claim. Paxton appears to work on ends of months whilst the Society's end of year is mid-month; we have also re-coded some of our inputs in order to better identify some costs and income so we need to spend time unravelling it or at least getting to a point where we can explain any differences! Once this is done, future use of the package should be straightforward – watch this space. . .

Wendy Lo-Vel

Membership

It's been a good time on the membership front recently, as we have seen about a quarter of our membership join since March this year, a good sign for the future of the project. To those of you who have joined recently – welcome. It is good to have you on board.

It is interesting that much of the increase in membership is from Devon, and north Devon at that, so I have a feeling that the Chairman has been busy, or maybe it's the local publicity that the successful visit to Bideford by Lord Attlee, our Patron, made a few weeks ago. This shows that publicity is so important to the development of the project. We need to build on this momentum and encourage even more members. To that end, if anyone needs any more leaflets, I have a good stock here and would be happy to send you some on request; just let me know! We all have places we can put a supply of leaflets – for example, museums/railways we are involved in, like-minded friends, local museums that we visit, etc. Please help us get the word around. The trustees can only do so much themselves and we all want to see the ship back in steam and sailing.

I can be contacted by email at: brian@steamheritage.co.uk or by phone (daytime) on 01483 542 907, should you need me.

Brian Gooding

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Triple Expansion Reciprocating Steam Engine or Swan Hunter/Doxford Patented Airless Injection Opposed Piston Balanced Marine Oil Engine?

By David Ramwell, then a Deck Cadet on the Bamenda Palm.

In the early 1960s, David was a Deck Cadet and, as part of his training, he had to do time in the engine room of a steamer and later a motorship. The second engineer set the exam following the experience. When he wrote this non-technical tongue in cheek article, it caught the second engineer's sense of humour and it was subsequently published in the Palmline magazine. David was surprised when he saw it in the 1963 issue of the magazine. It has not been published since. David would like readers to know that he was a teenager when it was written and his literary style may reflect that.



Please do not be put off by the title of this article. I do not intend to bore the reader with persiflage or technical details – mainly because I can't. What I will do, is to state the similarity between – to simplify the said title – a steam engine and a motor engine. However, I emphatically refuse to state which of these methods of propulsion I prefer because I know what would be the result.

Though many marine engineers are such because their occupation means a sound, secure, well paid job, there are a select few who are engineers because they love their work. To these men, the engine is not just an organised conglomeration of nuts and bolts – it is a living thing, animated, it has a soul, it has tantrums, it is unique among all other engines. Usually, the more fanatical engineers have substituted the engine for, say, a nagging wife. All their love and affection, care and tenderness is given to intricate instruments, massive pistons and pipes weaving in and out of metal.

The end result of the two engines is the same in as much as they both turn a propeller situated at the stern of the vessel and connected to the motion of the engine by a crankshaft, cranks, connecting rods, big ends, crossheads, cylinders, pistons, etc. etc. It is, however, generally accepted (though somewhat reluctantly by steam-

mongers) that the motor can turn the propeller faster than the steam.

Of the two, I consider the steam engine, aesthetically speaking, more impressive. This is because it is not enclosed. I remember once when I was in the engine room of a steamship, that a freak breeze blew down the ventilator and, for an instant, the perpetual steam mist lifted, and I caught a glimpse of those mighty metal arms exploding up and down. The fourth engineer rushed frantically over, cupped his hands round my ear, while I stuck a finger in the other, and started to explain the moving parts in a loud bellow. Too late – the mist settled again and we had to be content with chalking diagrams on the board. But that fleeting moment was captured for ever as the picture froze in my mind. You could feel the power. It made you feel so small and puny and I for one only closed my mouth, open in undiluted awe, because the steam made me cough.

With a sense of humour, one can survive in such an engine room. Without a sense of humour one becomes a wreck. Mentally that is, because, with conditions such, one can hardly expect physical standards to be perfect. However, I did notice a kind of metamorphosis take place in the newer engineers. They became, as it were, robotical and the steam oil, water and grit ceased to effect them.

While J was a steam timer, I discovered an excellent and practical sport. I called it "drop dodging" and the object of the game was to dodge the drops of boiling oil and water that fell from Heaven-knows-where. It was impossible, of course, to know all the spots where I was likely to encounter these uncomfortable blobs of pain, but I consider that, as an amateur, I did very well. Professional engineers occupied their time by trying to keep up with things that went wrong. Usually, these were little things – oil that got too hot, a pump that didn't pump, fires in the boiler room, the big end on the high pressure piston coming loose, molten metal running on to the bedplate or frantic efforts to compound the engine.

A steam engine is hotter, dirtier, greasier and noisier than a motor, but certainly not duller. In fact I was inclined to share the view that perhaps, after all, the engine was more than just an engine. To me, the steam was laughing when the pistons pounded the prop astern when we should have gone ahead and the engineer wrestled with the controls waiting, watching for the split second when he could pounce and show the mocking machine that he was still master.

The character of the motor engine is similar in its antagonism but its application of this sentiment is different. It is not so openly antagonistic. It responds readily to the easier-to-handle controls and then suddenly, out of the blue, it does the dirty when you least expect it. For a half a voyage or more, the pistons pound regularly, evenly, exactly as they should and then suddenly an over enthusiastic governor decides that the engine needs more governing and only the unconventional method of slamming it with a hammer shows it that, despite all, the engineer is still, yet again, the master. Why should fuel oil to main engine temperature rise slowly and then, when your back is turned, suddenly career past two hundred? If we can accept for the moment this engine personification theme then, of the two in question, I would say that the more modern, more complicated motor engine displays more intelligence than its forebear. It is cunning. It doesn't fight – it boxes scientifically – chooses its moments and lulls its human opponent into a state of relaxation before striking. If then, as is apparently indicated, the "intelligence" of the engine increases with its complexity; may I never see the day when buttons replace levers, valves, cocks, handles and other controls, or when bilge level finders automatically pump bilges, or when greasers are done away with, replaced by automatic tea brewers, perhaps worked off the main engine, or when computers register, record and file all log entries. Oh yes, it may be fine for five or six voyages, it may even be fine for five or six years but one day, when you're least expecting it, that engine is going to do the dirty on you. Your engineer paradise will be obliterated and all hell will be let loose. You have been warned.

God! We should have stuck to sail.

Memories

When Mrs Burgess was alive, John Puddy spoke to her about the ship. . .

I had a really interesting conversation with Mrs Burgess, whose husband bought *Freshspring* from the Admiralty.

Her husband, Oswald, told her he had bought a boat. Mrs Burgess was quite pleased as she knew her husband liked boats and it would be a nice hobby. He said they would sail it from Scotland, where it was. It was only later that Mr Burgess came clean and told her what he had done. She was horrified but went along with it.

When he bought the ship, they both went to Scotland to stay on it for a while. She says it was in lovely condition but covered in cobwebs. They cleaned it up a bit and enjoyed the stay; it even had cups and saucers. The plan was to steam back to Bristol. They had a crew of 12 ready to come up and Mr Burgess had some road maps. After checking around, they found it would not be wise to steam back as the ship had been laid up for a long time and no one knew how good the engine was nor really how to work it. The Admiralty moved her to Greenock for them. They returned to Bristol and had the ship towed down.

In Bristol there were quite a few people helping and they got the ship into beautiful condition and had lots of visitors.

Mrs Burgess put on a Christmas party each year and they had the cabin stove going. She says the Captain's Cabin was beautiful and the galley was immaculate, as was the accommodation.

They got 12 people together and steamed around the dock a couple of times. The ship was then broken into and loads of stuff stolen. Mr Burgess went around Bristol pubs to see if the wheels were anywhere in town; Mrs Burgess remembers there being one huge one and a small one in front.

Bristol was quite expensive so they arranged with Gloucester to take it there. The ship was towed up to Sharpness where 12 passengers got on to ride to Gloucester. As they approached Gloucester, a boat came down the canal and stopped them. It was Council people on board and they said the ship could not proceed to Gloucester as they did not want her there. Fred Larkham was one of the passengers on *Freshspring* and he said you can bring the ship to my yard, so that is what happened.

Sadly Mrs Burgess threw all the papers relating to the ship away years ago but still had some photographs.

Tales from the boiler room

One of the unknowns on board *Freshspring* has been the condition of the boiler. To the best of our knowledge, the boiler was last inspected and steamed thirty years ago while at Bristol Floating Harbour, c.1985. Since then, we know that the cover has been missing from the top of the funnel for a period of time, letting rainwater in from above, and the boiler room has also been flooded due to a hull plate failure (long since sealed and dry).

Back in May 2013, we removed the oil burner assemblies from the front of the furnace tubes to gain (albeit somewhat tight) access into the furnace tubes and combustion chamber further in, where we managed to remove some of the loose soot, but access needed to be improved before a serious cleaning and preparation effort could be made.

Coming more up to date and with more pressing tasks out of the way, work resumed in March 2015 as Alan Freebury (Trustee) and Mark Rozelaar (Trustee) started removing the access panels on the aft end around the furnace tubes. The plan was to reveal as much as possible of the pressure vessel so the boiler inspector can access it and determine if the boiler is serviceable. The panels, which create ducting for the forced draft from the Sissons engine and fan, came off well with just the occasional sheared bolt. As suspected, there was some corrosion above the centre furnace, probably due to water coming down the funnel and working its way down through the smokebox and around the furnace end.

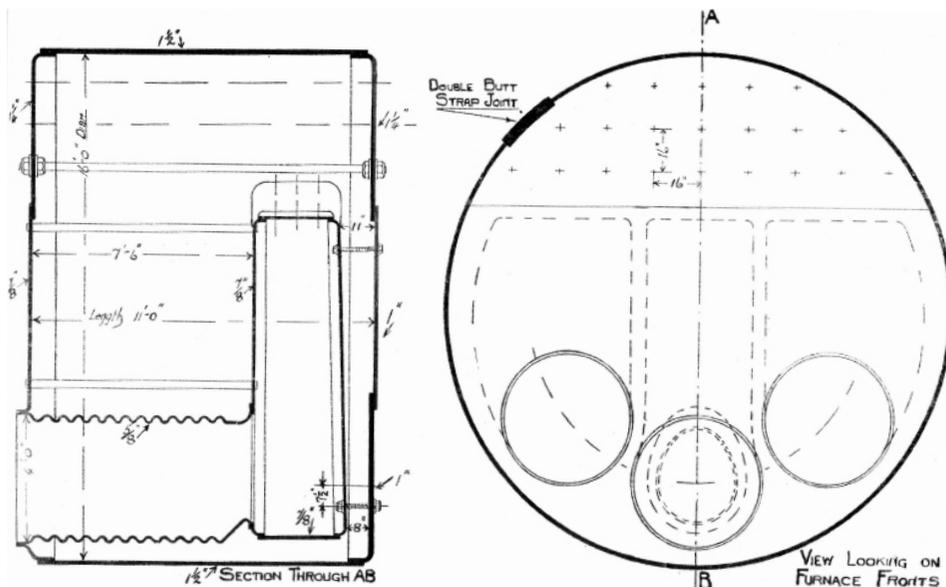


FIG. 18—Single-Ended Multitubular Wet-Bottomed Cylindrical Boiler, commonly known as a Scotch Boiler.

A drawing of a typical Scotch boiler, similar to that fitted to *Freshspring*.



Mark Rozelaar scraping off the loose debris inside a furnace tube.



Alan Freebury unbolts one of the forced draft access panels.

Access made through the smokebox, and the furnace front on the lifting tackle.

Our boiler inspector had advised that he would want to pay particular attention to the furnace tubes where they connect with the boiler end plate, so in order to allow him to do this and improve access into the furnace tube, we decided to remove the centre furnace frontage. After quite a bit of time in preparation and planning, we were able to remove the centre furnace front from the boiler. A problem we had was the lack of suitable points above it from which to suspend the lifting tackle as we did not want an angled pull in case the frontage swung free.

To give us more room, the smokebox door was removed and its pivots used to mount chains for the lift. The bottom of the smokebox was cut out to give us room to hang the lifting tackle down (it was rotten) and then the weight was taken on the hoist.

Next up was the clamps holding the frontage on. There are four of these basic clamps, the two at the top are 'doglegs', held down via a stud and nut onto the boiler face, while the lower pair are 'L' brackets and were again held onto the boiler via a stud and nut but were also attached to the furnace front with a nut and bolt. We tried a spanner on the nuts and despite liberal coatings of penetrating fluids over the previous weeks, they were not going to unscrew. Instead, each of the nuts had to be cut into close to the stud and then chiselled off. Eventually we were able to break the seal of the frontage and it gracefully swung free and has now been placed safely on the deck, giving us plenty of room to access the furnace tube for cleaning.

The initial impression after a quick clean off is that the boiler looks to be in a serviceable condition, though we will not be certain until all three furnace fronts are off, the boiler cleaned up and the boiler inspector takes his measurements to pass judgement.

Next steps for us on the boiler project will be to continue cleaning this centre tube while removing the remaining lagging from the exterior shell of the boiler. Having had a thorough asbestos survey, we know that the lagging covering the boiler



Bottom (ash) door removed from its hinges to reduce weight of the frontage.

does not contain any asbestos, so volunteers are able to safely remove it. Though it is not proving to be the easiest of jobs, as although the bulk of it is preformed sections of Calcium Silicate, it has chicken wire nailed to it, which is then plastered and covered with fibreglass matting.



Furnace frontage safely down on the deck

New Members – welcome

Mr Roy Colenso	<i>Barnstaple, Devon</i>
Mr John M Cooper	<i>Whimble, Devon</i>
Mr Stephen Corless	<i>Bideford, Devon</i>
Mr Russell Eastley	<i>Bideford, Devon</i>
Mr David Eeles	<i>Torquay, Devon</i>
Capt D Gannicliff	<i>Bideford Devon</i>
Mr George Hayes	<i>Falmouth, Cornwall</i>
Mr Thomas Macey	<i>Stroud, Glos</i>
Mr Alan Pitcher	<i>Mortehoe, Devon</i>
Mr Gayner Stiles	<i>Bristol</i>
Mr Mike Studden	<i>Berkeley, Glos</i>
Mr Chris Witts	<i>Gloucester</i>

Looking towards Bideford

With the intended move to Bideford being planned, I asked John if he could take a few pictures of the town and the river so that members can visualise the environment into which we plan to take the ship in the next year or two. He has also penned a few words about the town to give background to the plan – Ed.

Bideford was a thriving port from the 17th century, and at one point was the third most important in England. 15 warships were built there from 1806 to 1815 for the war with France. There were numerous shipyards from Wear Gifford to Appledore. Appledore shipyard still exists and has recently focused on the complete construction of Irish Navy vessels as well as sections of the new aircraft carrier *Queen Elizabeth*.

The appearance and development of steam navigation completely transformed the maritime world by introducing speed, regular passages and an increase in the tonnage carried. Ports were also transformed by railways to the docks. Bideford was no exception and when the railways came, sidings and docking facilities were built on the east side of the harbour, and steamships were built in considerable numbers along the banks of the River Torridge.

There has been a general decline in cargoes from Bideford and now only china clay and timber are exported. Bideford remains a town which values its rich maritime heritage and The Trust is pleased that a secure berth for *SS Freshspring* is available. It provides a safe base in a tourist town with inherent maritime skills, which will be valuable in the restoration and ongoing maintenance of the ship.

John Puddy



The view north towards the A39 road bridge high over the Torridge. The steam tug in the picture is the Ionia, a Falmouth tug that was steamed into Bideford about 15 years ago and has never moved again.



Looking south towards the town bridge. . .



. . . and, looking to the right, the car park on the quayside.



The red brick building is the offices of Bideford Town Council, with St Mary's Church behind. Seen from across the river.



Another view of Bideford's elegant architecture, this a little to the right of the picture above.

Atlantic Passage, 1943

The following story is taken from a notebook kept by Graham Gooding, my late father when he travelled from his family home in Barbados to London, the consequence of which was he met my mother, so if he hadn't made it over, I would not be here. – BG.

"All hands aboard by 11pm". This order meant me, for I was, for the next five or six weeks, an ordinary seaman aboard the United States Oil Tanker, Esso Charleston – a fine ship of some 19,000 tons displacement.

We were lying alongside the fuelling jetty at Point a Pierre, Trinidad – one of the world's longest jetties – taking aboard thousands of tons of heavy fuel oil consigned to the British Admiralty. I was surprised at the cleanliness of the steel decks, even when they were loading: as a matter of fact, except for one occasion later in the voyage, there was nothing at all to show that our cargo was anything but the cleanest of solids.

It was night when I went aboard, and a partial blackout was in force. I could see little of my floating home for the present. After heaving my luggage aboard, and tripping over scores of the small pipes which run in incomprehensible tangles over a tanker's deck, I was shown my quarters. War conditions had led to a certain amount of improvisation: my cabin was in fact the fourth engineer's. But there was no fourth engineer, and the cabin had had four bunks squeezed into it, instead of the single bed, and was intended to be used as a hospital. But even this was no longer to be the case: it was now shared by myself and the junior third mate, the Gunnery officer, an ensign engineer in the U.S. Navy, and the ship's signalman. Quarters were very cramped. Each of us had a small cupboard about 3ft by 1ft 6in. by 1ft, and there was a metal desk, the drawer of which slid out when the ship rolled. That was all – except for the heat, which was almost unbelievable. For a week the temperature in that cabin did not drop below 100 degrees.

Formalities with Americans did not take long. Inside of two minutes my cabin companions knew most of my life history and that I was working my passage to England. (That the ship was going to England was news to them, and not very welcome news. They were by no means enthusiastic about the north Atlantic passage: I later well understood their feelings.) I learned in my turn about the amorous adventures of the signalman (what he couldn't do in the back seat of a car wasn't worth doing), that the ensign was a newspaper editor in a small town in Virginia, and that the junior third mate had been a coastguardsman (the American Eagle and the words "U.S. Coastguards" were tattooed on his arm), and that he had recently been torpedoed and after sailing in a lifeboat for five days had reached St Vincent.

We sailed at midnight. By dawn, we were steaming through the Bocas (*the Bocas del Dragón, the passage to the north between Trinidad and Venezuela*) – said to be one of the most beautiful harbour entrances in the world: I can well believe it. We were the leading ship of the convoy – in these waters we travelled in single file – as we had the Commodore of the convoy, a U.S. Navy Commander. In a few hours, the convoy formed up, four lines of nine ships each escorted by a destroyer and three 'P.C.' (Patrol Craft)

boats. And so we sailed out from Trinidad, under the towering mass of the Venezuelan Cordilleras, into the blue waters of the Spanish main, into waters long ago famed for pirates, and once again in disrepute, this time for the undersea pirates of Germany.

Naturally, I was at first rather apprehensive about the submarines which were reputed – and correctly so – to be so numerous in these waters. It was reassuring, however, to hear that the whole voyage down from New York had been made without a single submarine alarm. After a few hours, I felt as safe as on a peacetime voyage – almost.

I was now able to take stock of the ship. It was certainly large (575 feet long and 70-odd feet in breadth, I believe were the figures). Forward was a raised fo'c'sle, with bosun's stores and carpenter's shop, and a 3 inch dual purpose gun mounted on the deck: then the forward well deck, then the midships house, with the shelter deck: a miscellaneous storehouse below, and the deck officers' quarters and a bridge above (two 20mm A.A. Oerlikon guns were mounted on the bridge), then the after well deck, and finally the poop, containing the crew's quarters, engineer officers' cabins, officers' mess, and having two 20mm guns and a 4 inch naval gun mounted aft. The engine and boiler rooms were aft, as in most tankers, and, obviously, the smoke stack was, too. The well decks were very low to the water – the freeboard was only about 6ft when the ship was fully laden – and so were awash in anything but the calmest weather. Gangway across each of these decks was by means of a "flying bridge" or "catwalk", which was a narrow bridge about ten feet above the deck level joining the raised decks of the poop and midships house, and midships house and fo'c'sle respectively. In rough weather it was quite impossible to get across the catwalk. But more of this anon.

I was introduced to seaman's work in the easy way. The first job was painting – painting the chains of the catwalk, as a matter of fact. It was hot, and so we worked (I was in the bosun's gang) in shorts alone. By mid-morning (coffee time is from 10 to 10.15), I was dappled grey: by afternoon I was completely grey and had to take a bath in paraffin. In future I wore a shirt.

All the work, however, was not as easy as painting. Potatoes were the bane of my life. I shall never forget hauling hundred pound sacks of the wretched things out of the shelter deck, up a companion way, and dodging seas on the well deck at the same time, along the catwalk, and finally to the galley, at the extreme stern of the ship. The total distance was about 120 yards, and it would have been quite a good obstacle race course at the best of times. With a hundred pound sack of potatoes on the shoulder and a rolling ship underfoot, it became a wonderful lesson in balancing. I now understand why sailors walk with their feet spread apart twenty-four inches and take steps of only about twelve inches!

Coiling ropes is an art – or perhaps one should say, a heavy industry. Coiling wire ropes is worse still.

A sailor is indeed a jack of all trades; some of the tasks I had, and by no means all, are the following: painting of all sorts – deck, bulkheads, chains (a tiresome job, as each link has to be dealt with separately), pipes, passageways; scrubbing of decks and washing down with firehoses – a firehose kicks like a gun when the water is turned on and often needs two men to hold it; 'sujying', viz scrubbing paintwork with a special

grease removing soap solution which also removes one's skin; rust-scraping; greasing; carpentry in the lifeboats, the seats of which were practically the only wooden fittings on the ship; stowing of gear of all sorts; operating steam winches; manipulation of ropes and hoses; operating of pulley blocks and derricks; rigging up and dismantling of the gangway; bailing, (imagine bailing on a 20,000 ton ship – but we did: the forepeak was leaking and there was no drainage from the forepeak to the bilges); and a host of others. Yes, we had full days, which was just as well, as we did not have much spare time in which to let the thought of submarines prey on our nerves.

Highlights of the day were the meals. No matter the weather, the cooks could be trusted to turn out a meal worthy of a first rate hotel. Breakfast, lunch, dinner: all were excellent and apparently unlimited in quantity. In my unusual position as a 'workaway', I had meals in the officers' mess. They were a mixed bunch, and a friendly and pleasant lot. At the head of the table would sit the Commodore. He was rotund and chubby, with sandy hair and a cheery personality. For the whole voyage he wore a very short pair of shorts: when the weather grew colder he put on woollen underpants which showed quite a bit of leg beyond his shorts – but he was above worrying about little things like that. One day in the Caribbean, when a choppy sea was breaking over the rail onto the well deck, the ship's company were surprised and amused to see their Commodore absolutely nude holding on to the rail and splashing about in the swirling water on the after well deck.

The navigation of the convoy was the responsibility of the Commodore. He had to see that the ships kept their proper station and to prevent, as far as possible, any straggling. On one occasion, about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, the Commodore signalled to a British 'Victory Ship', which was badly out of position, instructions to come into line. He received the reply: "Sorry, I was having tea: it won't happen again".

The Captain sat next to the Commodore. He was a Greek by extraction, Alexander Zafinos by name. He, like most of the officers, had risen from the ranks of ordinary seaman. He had a pleasant personality and a happy-go-lucky attitude.

Then came the first mate, a Dave who spoke English (or American) with a Swedish accent. What a worker he was. A real old-time sailor, brought up under sail, he really ran the ship. His finger was in every pie, and if he couldn't find something to supervise, he would pick up a paint brush and find some out of the way corner to paint. Rasmus Rasmusen was the name he laboured under.

My own place came next, and on my left sat the ship's clerk, a short lad, rather full of his own importance, Al Knee. Beyond him was the ensign, already mentioned, and the next seat belonged to the second assistant engineer, who although he had the English sounding name of Fairman, was the dangerous mixture half Italian, half German! He was a pleasant man of 28 or 30, and would spend hours talking about his wife and children.

The end of the table opposite to the Commodore was graced by the Chief Engineer, Emoor Bordelon, a Louisianan of French extraction. He looked and talked like a film 'tough guy', making wisecracks – and, for that matter, all his remarks, out of the side of his mouth. For all his rough exterior, his was one of the soundest hearts on the ship.

On Bordelon's left sat the first assistant engineer, Giddens, a tall Anglo-Saxon with blue eyes and fair hair, and an irrepressible sense of humour. A fine fellow was Giddens.

The third assistant engineer, a rather sour faced man, took the next seat, and beyond him were two seats occupied at various times by four officer cadets – Henry Perry, Joe Radigan, Ernie Laroux, and Harvey Gittler. Then came the third mate, Mr Campbell. He was a real seafaring man of the Hollywood type. Tough as nails, large and solid, with a savage looking scar on one side of his neck, and a marvellous command of the lower scale of the American language. I stood rather in awe of Mr Campbell until, one day, while I was painting and crooning "Riding down from Bangor" to myself, I heard an even less melodious and flatter voice chime in with the next line – yes it was Mr Campbell. He was a native of Maine. We became firm friends: on such little things are friendships built.

The second mate took the final place. He was of (so he claimed) French extraction, with the not so French name of Zilbermann. He was round-faced with a smart Clark Gable moustache: he looked quite a lad for the ladies, and certainly he could entertain us with some pretty lurid yarns about his conquests in various parts of the world.

Social life was poor. In the evening sometimes a few of us, each carrying his lifebelt, would collect in the officers' mess and listen to the wireless or play cards: in rough weather we could not do this as it was too dangerous to cross the 'catwalk' in the dark. Occasionally we might play chess or draughts (checkers to the Americans). Most of the spare time, however, was spent reading. The American 'comic' sheets, Joe Palooka, Bringing Up Father, Superman, and so on were very popular amongst all the officers. Most were doing some studying, too, for their promotion.

The seamen were as a mixed a lot as the officers. I will just mention a few examples. The bosun: he was a pleasant and kind hearted, very powerful, oldish man. He had, unfortunately, a perpetual grouse against authority: perhaps this stood in his way of promotion.

Tex, an A.B., an excellent seaman, was a young Texan fisherman. He was a grand lad interesting in conversation and outlook: a good example of American youth.

O'Donnell, an A.B., was mainly characterised by amazing ingenuity in finding ways and means of wasting time. He left the ship at New York, owing a considerable amount of borrowed money, and regretted by no-one – except perhaps, his creditors.

Dick Dickson, ordinary seaman, seemed just that, until one morning he started quoting line after line of Shakespeare. It came out, eventually, that he was a student of English literature, gone to sea as a war job.

Danny Hall, A.B., moustached and slightly bearded, or perhaps just unshaven, with twinkling Irish eyes, and a fund of seaman's philosophy, was a delightful man to work with. He was a fine sailor, had the sea in his blood and a wife in New York ("She is a dope: she likes it when I come home"), and had been torpedoed three times.

There, then is the background to my five weeks as a sailor – the ship, the work and the people.

We left Trinidad at midnight and sailed into the Spanish Main. The weather was lovely and the sea was a brilliant blue, the waves dancing in the sunlight and white

capped in the tradewinds. Along the port side slipped the South American mountains. Truly, it was a great setting for the beginning of an adventure.

About midday we lost sight of land. The convoy increased its speed to the maximum (the speed of the slowest ship), about seven and a half knots. All was peaceful; was it possible that there was a war on?

The miles slipped by and day passed into night; night into day. Still peace. I began to feel confident that there would be no submarines, when suddenly three heavy, muffled explosions shook the ship. Depth charges! The alarm bells rang furiously. That meant a rush to the cabins for lifebelts, and a rush then to the lifeboats. Some distance behind us, a small P.C. boat was dashing around in small circles, peppering the sea with depth charges. A particularly large one brought up a mass of foaming oil, and then the performance ceased. Later the destroyer signalled the Commodore to the effect that the P.C. boat claimed to have sunk a sub. Good work. This gave us a lot of confidence too: the Navy (U.S.) was on the job!

There was no further submarine trouble in the first lap of the voyage, which took us to New York. We passed close to Anancas and Aruba, collecting more ships there, then northwards to Haiti and Cuba. From Guatemala Bay, we got more ships and additional escorts. Then through the Windward passage, through the Virgin Islands, and into the Atlantic we steamed. Off Cape Hatteras the weather became colder, and we had the inevitable gale. It was quite rough, and the hospital, right in the stern of the ship, went through some most uncomfortable antics. To stand at one of the doorways and watch the seas smashing across the well deck was unforgettable: the howling of the wind, the sheets of spray whistling across the deck so thickly that sometimes the bridge was scarcely visible, the green seas pounding across the decks, the bow of the ship now climbing up and up the grey and white-streaked walls of water that rose in front, now dropping down, down, down into seemingly bottomless pit: all these combined to form one of the most soul-stirring spectacles it is possible to witness. One can appreciate a storm in a convoy better than when one's ship is alone. To see the other ships tossing and shuddering, standing first on the stern, and then nose down with the screw racing madly in mid-air, to see cascades of water driving over their decks, to see them sometimes blotted out as a wave rises between them and ourselves, makes one realise even more fully the appalling majesty of nature.

After two days the storm blew itself out, and with the return of good visibility the Commodore reassembled his flock. But there were six missing – it is extremely difficult to keep station on dark rough nights, and by morning the ship may easily be alone on the ocean. Catalina aircraft were now appearing – we were only about 500 miles from New York – and they found and guided five of our lost sheep back to us. The sixth seemed to have disappeared entirely.

Colder and colder grew the weather. The Gulf Stream was left behind: we entered the icy Labrador Current. This was marked by a raging blizzard. Snow piled up on the windward side of the ventilators and bulkheads: icicles festooned the rigging. In this guise we entered New York.

It gets more exciting as they head out across the North Atlantic. More next time. . .

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Trustees and members who attended the 2015 Annual General Meeting visited the ship in the Pill afterwards. Although she looks a bit careworn, below decks she is in good condition and is now safe from the tidal bore on the River Severn.