

A Cachalot Outing - 1969

Or

The Tale of the One-Trip Barman

In June 1969 my wife had been safely delivered of our second daughter, and as business was quiet in the Eastern Docks my then employer had given me a day off so that I could be of assistance at home. My wife sweetly said that she could manage without my assistance and why didn't I go off and have a day out somewhere. It so happened that the Cachalots had an outing organised that week to the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, a place I had long wished to visit. At that time the Club organised only about one outing per year, and as a relatively new member I had never been on one, so I promptly booked one of the few remaining seats on the coach.

We embarked in the early morning outside the Club premises at Royal Mail House, and even though the Club was not yet open both the Steward and Barman were present to see us off, minus their white jackets. On looking around at my fellow passengers I did not feel quite so bad at taking a day off, and reflected that business must have been slack indeed throughout the whole port, as there were to my recollection a Ministry of Transport Surveyor, two Marine Superintendents, one Hydrographic Surveyor, one Assistant Dockmaster, one Senior Pilot, one Shipping Agency Manager and one Solicitor besides myself on the coach.

Shortly before leaving, the Barman produced four crates of bottled beer which were reverently lifted into the front of the coach and stowed beside the driver. A short discussion ensued among some Senior Members about beer prices and who was to be in charge of the refreshments, following which a Very Senior Member turned around and looked at me with one eyebrow raised and I found myself volunteered for the job of travelling barman. The Club Barman solemnly presented me with a bottle opener, a small cash float, told me the prices to charge and urged me to collect all the empty bottles and return them to the Club with the day's takings!

Being one of the few members travelling alone I had two seats to myself near the front, and as it was a bright sunny morning I was looking forward to relaxing, enjoying the countryside and reading the daily paper, thinking that no members would need a drink probably until we reached Greenwich, especially as several wives were aboard. We had scarcely reached the A3 at Portsmouth before there was a discreet cough at my shoulder and I turned around to find my first customer, with a small queue beginning to form behind him in the gangway. I was then kept busy for a few miles opening bottles and dealing with the money. The prices if I remember rightly, were 2/3d for a bottle of brown ale and 2/9d for bitter, which soon presented a problem of where to keep the money as halfcrowns and old pennies weighed rather a lot. No one seemed to have a bag to spare so I was forced to keep all the cash in a trouser pocket.

By the time we had arrived and parked adjacent to Greenwich Park, three beer crates contained only empty bottles and one of my trouser pockets was full of coins. I tried to find a hiding place for the money on the coach, but the driver refused to let me leave any aboard even though it would be locked up. He also insisted that the beer crates be moved from view and covered with coats. Most of the party went straight to the museum, and after adjusting the cash between both trouser pockets to avoid a port list, I followed.

We all enjoyed an excellent tour of the Maritime Museum and the Club had arranged for one of the Assistant Curators to be on hand to answer any questions. The Museum was featuring during that month a display of photographs, ship models, equipment and plans of long gone coastal sailing craft which I found particularly interesting. Most of the main Museum exhibits were quite fascinating of course to the Club members, marvellously detailed ship models, unique artefacts from famous ships, beautiful paintings – we could have spent a whole day just touring the Museum. Time however had to be left for a visit to the Observatory, an optional photograph standing astride the Greenwich Meridian, a walk around the Park and a sandwich lunch before returning to the coach.

With my hands in my trouser pockets most of the time, I had managed to keep up with the party, which must have given me a carefree, day-by-the-seaside air but was, I found out, the only sure way to stop my trousers falling down (I was much slimmer in the waist in those days). It was lovely dry sunny weather and we were all a bit reluctant to board the coach for the homeward trip. Happily someone now produced a strong plastic bag and I was able to put all the money into it, move the one remaining crate of bottles to the spare seat beside me and settle down to wait for the afternoon orders. Some member who had found his lunch in a local public house and was a trifle late returning to the coach, remarked in passing that he had found bottled beer there to be cheaper than on the coach – by a penny if I remember rightly. In no mood to discuss the price of beer on such a fine afternoon, I replied that I hoped he had bought himself a sufficient supply to last until we reached Southampton so that he would not be asking me for any (or words to that effect).

We had cleared the suburbs heading South when word was passed forward to me that a few of the older passengers in the rear would like a drink, but did not think that they could safely negotiate the swaying gangway in order to fetch one! Filling my pockets with assorted bottles I went aft to take orders. I found that the wisest way to serve it was to open the beer over the gangway as by now the bottles were warm and active. One bottle had previously been opened by a man over his wife's lap with dire consequences and they were still hardly on speaking terms. No glasses were provided which was very wise, but it meant that on the homeward run there was no time for niceties – once a bottle was opened it had to be delivered straight to the customer's mouth without delay! The remaining stock was soon used up and I was able to collect all the empties and count the takings, which thankfully tallied, before our next stop.

It had been arranged that we would stop for a cream tea at a roadside cafe just south of Guildford, which we duly did. This then again raised the problem of what to do with the beer money, but a kind lady suggested I put the money bag into her shopping bag which she was taking with her, and this solved the problem. We enjoyed a delicious tea of scones, raspberry jam and clotted cream which was almost up to West Country standard. The tea was poured and conversation flowed. It was a fitting finale to a lovely day out.

People struggled reluctantly back to the coach yet again and were nearly all aboard when the lady with the shopping bag suddenly realised that she was without it. I dived back into the cafe and fortunately found it undisturbed under the table where she had been sitting, with the contents intact. I thankfully returned the bag to her but kept the cash on the seat beside me until we reached Royal Mail House again.

As it was late afternoon when we returned, no staff were on hand to see us back but I off-loaded the empty crates and, with some help, carried them upstairs to the Club rooms and handed over the takings plus bottle opener to the Storekeeper who had been a passenger. My first Club outing had been interesting, eventful and enjoyable but as barman I had been kept so busy that I had not had an alcoholic drink myself all day, which my wife later found hard to believe.

Terry Winsborough