

S.S. City of Windsor  
Built in 1923 as the *Knareboro'* for Ellerman & Bucknall.

## City of Windsor

*Our Hon. Archivist, Hamish Roberts, recalls his first trip in 1945, immediately after the war.*

### **Joining Day**

The final war-time voyage of the “City of Windsor” commenced in April 1945, her destination being Calcutta. On VE Day she was in the Atlantic, nearing Gibraltar. From Calcutta she sailed for South Africa, calling at Durban and Cape Town before crossing the South Atlantic to Buenos Aires, Montevideo and Rosario. VJ Day was celebrated in the River Plate region, after which a full cargo of wet salted hides was loaded for discharge at London, and it was upon her arrival in the Royal Albert Dock that I joined the vessel. The war having recently ended meant it was possible for the Glasgow office of City Line Ltd to tell me, after an interview, that the ship I would be appointed to was the Bucknell steamer “City of Windsor”.

On arrival at Euston on the Royal Highlander train from Inverness, I made my way to Ellerman’s Head office, then at Stone House, Bishopsgate in the City of London, where I was taken in tow by a friendly individual whose fate that day was to meet the “Windsor” on her afternoon arrival in the Royal Docks and, as a sideline to what must surely have been more pressing and important business concerning the husbandry and well being of the vessel, deliver me on board in reasonably good order and condition. I cannot recall who was my chaperone, nor his standing in the organisation. I do, however, recall, whilst on our way to a city sandwich bar, encountering the Chief Marine Superintendent of Ellerman Lines, to whom I was presented and, perhaps, cursorily assessed as not exactly God’s gift to Ellermans. Having no idea of what a Chief Marine Super should look like, Captain Kenneth MacDonald OBE, to me seemed the epitome of the well dressed city gent.

Joining a ship, as a first trip cadet, is similar to setting out on a blind date. One does not know quite what to expect, but whatever it turns out to be, there is no alternative. Whilst important and enduring, first impressions are sometimes coloured as much by the surroundings, sights, sounds and circumstances prevailing at the time and place of the tryst, as by the good fortune of one’s expectations being met by the “date”. Pre-conceived expectations could be disappointing. I am now certain that I did not know what to expect, or whether I was satisfied by what met me on an Autumn afternoon in 1945, which was however destined to be, for the next twenty-five months, my constant companion and refuge, providing food in plenty, comfortable lodgings, work – not too arduous – adequate remuneration, companionship and tuition from real experts, together with the privilege of seeing nature at her very best and worst. On awakening, on most mornings, in a different part of the globe, variety ashore at foreign ports and, most important of all, the opportunity to commence a career in the British Merchant Navy, the world’s biggest and best. All-in-all, an excellent partnership.

Awaiting the arrival of the ship alongside number 13 berth, Royal Albert Dock, in the late afternoon haze, stood what seemed to be a reception committee. A rather forlorn, non-descript bunch whose ranks were swelled by my chaperone and me without the slightest arousal of interest. This I discovered was a common feature surrounding the arrival of a merchant ship. The group might include, for example, representatives from the Company’s and Agent’s offices, stevedores, bunkering people, HM Customs, repair firms reps, gangs standing by to heave ashore and secure the ship’s mooring ropes and, even, the man from the Mission, eager to find the “boys” room. Each one, no doubt, believed his reason for boarding to be of prime importance, but of all those waiting to clamber on board, the most momentous steps taken were my own.

The drabness of the afternoon seemed to be accentuated by the slow moving apparition gently approaching the dockside. The blunt bowed, heavily plated and riveted, battleship-grey hull, carrying equally dull grey upperworks and masts and exhibiting guns on platforms forward and aft, and on the wings of an armour plated bridge, with slots where

windows should have been, was however easily identified as a "City boat" by the only splash of colour on board, the tall coal-burners "Woodbine" funnel, displaying the Ellerman colours, orange, white and black, which had replaced the wartime grey on the homeward passage after VJ Day. Also prominently visible was the Red Ensign, and the Ellerman & Bucknell house flag, the latter fluttering from a staff above the main top gallant mast truck and topped by a pedant carrying the initials "JRE", John Reeves Ellerman, the first Sir John Ellerman. The sailors' interpretation, I soon discovered, was "Jews Rule England" or "Jesus Redeemeth Everyone".

After much whistle blowing and tooting of tugs, and orders being given which meant nothing to me, the whole length of the ship lay alongside number 13 berth, "starboard side to." A gangway appeared, over which the reception committee clambered on board and disintegrated. I must have been carried along with them and, finding myself on board a ship, I felt I really had arrived. Having been delivered into the seemingly unconcerned care of the Master, I was left completely to my own devices. The faceless people who had scrambled up the gangway had apparently bearded the senior officers, with whom they had business, in their cabins. Most of the junior officers, quarter-masters, naval and military gunners, were eager to go ashore to the phone or the pub, before packing their bags and bidding, in some cases, only a temporary sailors' farewell to the "City of Windsor".

Soon I met another lost soul, the 21 year old 5th Engineer, usually called the "fiver", whose place in the engine room pecking order was roughly equivalent to mine on deck. He was also making his first voyage.

### **Docklands Scene**

Because of a nation wide dockers' strike, no cargo work was commenced. Troops, over 6000, had been deployed throughout the docks to handle perishable foodstuffs and other essential cargo, but wet, salted hides fell into a less vital category. Their presence however was evidenced by the stench emanating from the holds where the hatch covers had been opened.

Reconversion and repair work, mainly in the engine room and what had been gunners' accommodation in No. 4 tween deck, soon got under way, mainly in the hands of Messers William Badges & Co. Ltd, a well known London River marine engineering concern. Only one of their many workers now remains in my memory, a gentleman known throughout the ship as "Chocolate", perhaps from the colour of his boiler suit. On the boat deck, a group of the firm's foremen had rigged up a private mess, or tea swindle, and it was Chocolate's job to stand-by this establishment in the capacity of Man Friday, running errands for his gaffers as and when required. His official title was boilermakers runner. Constantly on the move, he kept a bicycle at the foot of the gangway to speed up his work. I often wondered where he went, or upon what important or nefarious business he was engaged. Perhaps his main concern was to reach the local bookies shop in time to place bets on his masters' behalf.

The stevedores, or dockers, day commenced, after the strike, at 8 a.m., with the gangway groaning under the weight of hordes of men who, on arrival on board, dispersed to join gangs at one or other of the ship's six cargo holds. Mostly attired in an unofficial uniform of ex-army greatcoat, cloth cap and muffler, they carried wooden handled metal cargo hooks which helped not only to manhandle boxes or crates, but also easily to broach cargo packages with a view simply to discover the nature of the contents or, frequently, to extract and misappropriate items they felt to be of value or interest.

The generic term "docker" encompassed, in addition to those actually manhandling cargo in the holds, winch and crane drivers, hatchmen, foremen, tally clerks, and those employed ashore on the dockside or in cargo sheds, most of whom seemed to be pushing wheelbarrows. The daily routine of their arrival on board was recorded in the scrap deck log book under the legend "shore labour boarded".

In the London docks, however, a considerable number of the shore labour had, prior to boarding, already put in a couple of hours hard work sinking pints of beer in some of the dockland public houses licenced to open between 6 and 8 a.m. Nowadays, no doubt, the rest of the day would be required to breathalyse them all.

Disputes, generally of a minor nature, frequently arose when cargo work was in progress and in order to avoid a general down tools situation, negotiations were required between the dockers' Union representatives, the stevedore managers, and the shipowners cargo superintendent in order to find a mutually acceptable solution and allow work to continue until the next problem arose. Many ludicrous reasons were advanced in support of stoppages and demands for extra money, such as a demand on behalf of the tough nuts for embarrassment money when handling porcelain lavatory pans.

I soon formed the impression that the seamen and the dockers had little in common. There was virtually no social contact between them and I recall a quartermaster describe, perhaps rather ungallantly, a lady he had met in a Canning Town public house as a “real docker’s daughter, Wapping tits and a Barking arse.”

A common bond between dockers, seamen and other denizens of dockland did however exist in the form of their respect for, or fear of, Miss Sybil Campbell, the first woman to be appointed a Metropolitan Stipendiary Magistrate. Miss Campbell adorned the bench at Tower Bridge Magistrates Court and was considered to have a strong personal dislike of those types. Woe betide any minor villains guilty of drunkenness, assault, cargo broaching and similar everyday events.

Communication between the officers and Indian crew members was, I discovered, carried on in a form of “pidgin” English. Not one of the Europeans on board could cobble together anything resembling a real sentence in Lascari, the nautical version of Hindustani, although old “Nichy Hai”\*, the Chief of all the Engineers, boasted that he always “addressed the native in his own lingo”. Most had, however, picked up a few words which apparently sufficed to enable both sides to reach an agreement. The European generally qualified his attempt to communicate by use of the grunt “Eh?”, somewhat similar to the query “savvy?” when talking to a Chinaman, to which the Indian seaman made some sort of noise in affirmation. It seemed to work. The Indian seaman had, through long experience, acquired a good idea of all he was required to do in the line of duty. As with European crews, social chit chat seemed to be of no consequence.

*\* The ancient, cantankerous Scot who was Chief of five engineers and a large Indian engine room crowd, boasted that he “always spoke to the natives in their own language”. Any query concerning the whereabouts of any of his minions drew the standard response, “nichy hai,” or “down below”, hence his nick-name “Nichy Hai,” or “Nichi”.*

*The species is probably now extinct, sadly.*

Having, early on, purchased a copy of “The Malim Sahib’s Hindustani”, then the standard work for the guidance of any ships’ officers keen to learn the language, I made a serious attempt to study the subject, but being more or less laughed out of court I soon gave up – for life – and followed the dismal example set by my seniors.

Other than by the cooks and stewards, no company uniform or standard type of clothing was worn by our Indian crew members, although there might have been a standard issue of oilskins and seaboots. Rather, they gave the impression of having been given a voucher to visit the local Oxfam shop, if there was such a thing in those days, and told to keep themselves. Woolly balaclava helmets, scarves, old jackets, knitted woollen mittens, thick working trousers, and socks jammed into ill-fitting Wellington boots contrasted sharply with the illustrations of uniforms worn by Indian deck ratings on board the grand passenger liners of the P&O Company – knee length dark blue tunic worn over white trousers, supported by a red cummerbund, the complete ensemble topped with a small round brimless cap.

Many of the items of heavy weather gear would have been acquired as “comforts”, knitted by well meaning ladies across the country as a contribution to the war effort.

Inveterate traders, the Indians went ashore in packs, combing East Ham, Canning Town and the length of Commercial Road in search of bargains, providing personal comfort, stock in trade for future business deals in other ports, or treasures to take home. When ashore they appeared always to be laden with carrier bags.

Culinary arrangements for Indian sailors and firemen were in the hands of “bhandaries”, or cooks, small wizened, uncommunicative individuals who squatted on deck outside their own galleys on the port and starboard sides of the poop deck aft, grinding, with what resembled a pestle and mortar, the basic ingredients for their staple diet of curry and rice.

## **Beyond the Dock Gates**

It may be interesting to reflect on what was taking place in the world beyond the dock gates as I became familiar, or slightly more familiar, with life on board a cargo steamer.

The famous Cunard “Queen” liners had been repatriating American troops, about 14,000 each voyage, and followed that up later in 1945 by carrying large numbers of G.I. brides to their new homes in the USA. The “Khaki” election of July 1945 had replaced Churchill and his coalition with the Labour government under Clement Atlee. Many merchant ships were still subject to control by the Ministry of War Transport and, with passenger tonnage being fully engaged in trooping, as hospital ships, or repatriating prisoners of war, passenger accommodation was at a premium.

Demobilisation had got under way and those with early release group numbers were leaving the armed forces. Men continued to be called up under the Conscription Act, although it was not until 1947 that they were officially termed "National Service Men".

Details of the qualifications for the award of campaign stars and clasps for Service in the Merchant Navy were made public, and it was thought to be the first occasion on which the Merchant Navy had become entitled to decorations which ordinarily go to the Army, Navy and Air Force.

The Nautical Magazine for October 1945 reported that Sir Stafford Cripps, speaking at a Luncheon of the Radio Industry Council, predicted the day "when ships of all nations will be fitted with Radar, just as today they carry wireless" and, "once that day has come" he said, in perhaps over optimistic terms, "delays to shipping due to fog and perils of the deep, like icebergs, will have gone for good."

The Country had reverted to Greenwich Mean Time for the first time since 1939 and, when day work ended each day it was growing dark in London's dockland.

Vikkun Quisling, the Norwegian who aided the Nazi invasion in 1940 was standing trial as a war criminal, as was Pierre Laval, the Vichy French collaborator. Lloyds List of 15th October announced that the American authorities would that day hand over the port of Cherbourg to the French, and Reuter reported that the port of Antwerp had been returned to the Civil authorities and within four weeks the allied military forces would completely relinquish their control of the port.

Most of the Continent of Europe was in a state of ruination, particularly the great ports of Hamburg, Bremen, Rotterdam, Antwerp, and many others, including some of the Mediterranean. Quays, railways, cranes power supplies and roads were destroyed or badly damaged, and the approaches still had to be cleared of mines and wrecks. Many were under control of allied governments or military.

Soon it became apparent to me that the organisation of, or demand for, any communal recreational or social activities involving and for the common benefit of the European members of the ships crew was a non-event. Deprived of almost any form of female company, and having no interest in the doings, non-doings, or misdoings of the extensive variety of local, shore dwelling non-descripts who had each day ascended and descended the gangway, each man was left to find his own leisure time entertainment. This however, seemed to present few problems. Most people, when off watch, ventured ashore. Their private, or business affairs seemed to place few demands on their time or energy, and once ashore, rather than sight seeing or making an attempt to satisfy any educational or cultural appetite, their sights were set on easy entertainment of the baser type which, in London and most other large ports was, if somewhat repetitive, readily and easily accessible.

North Woolwich was neither exciting, interesting, nor attractive. A curving street, lined by small terraced houses, occupied by dockers and other longshore types, ran from the dock gates by Harlands works to the police station, and finally to the embarkation jetty for the Woolwich Free Ferry, a service maintained, since 1889, by the London County Council. The stout vessels 'John Benn and Will Crook were then in service.

The community centre for the locals and itinerant seafarers was a public house called the 'General Gordon', but known familiarly throughout the district, and perhaps world-wide as the 'Roundhouse', a typical East End dock area pub, complete with such anachronisms as a bottle and jug bar, flock wallpaper, and local dockers family groups, including a lady of venerable but uncertain age, wearing bedroom slippers being short of teeth, and when being plied with another Guinness, or drop of gin, was fondly addressed as 'Gran'.

The Roundhouse was my first experience of a bar of the type internationally familiar to sailors as 'the first and last', being the nearest to the dock gate for a drink on arrival at a port, or the last prior to sailing or reboarding the ship. Sadly, some sailors never ventured far beyond the first and last whether in London, Lisbon, Lagos, or Liverpool.

Fortunately, escape from North Woolwich to other equally drab but entertaining venues was not difficult. Those who craved some fresh air could avail themselves of the Free Ferry crossing and sample the delights of Woolwich or nearby Greenwich on the south bank of the Thames. Alternatively, a cheap bus ride took us through Silvertown, of world war one explosion fame, and home to Tate and Lyle and Knights' Castille soap, to Canning Town. Here, the 'Liverpool Arms' rivalled the 'Bridge House' in offering hospitality to Jack ashore. Canning Town also provided an opportunity to see what was on at the "pictures" in the large local cinema, the 'Imperial'. Buses from Canning Town were convenient for the whole length of Commercial Road to Gardiners Corner at Aldgate, on the fringe of the City. In the

opposite direction, buses ran to East Ham High Street, for the popular-Saturday night dances held in East Ham Town Hall.

Seafarers approaching the Port of London might say they were bound for the "London River"; for the great port of London encompassed not only the well known 'Royal' group of docks but all the numerous wharves, jetties and dock systems sited on both sides of the Thames from Gravesend to London Bridge, as well as river buoy moorings, and the dry docks and repair yards required by marine engineering concerns. The principal enclosed dock systems were however, to be found on the northern bank - Tilbury Docks, as distinct from Tilbury Riverside Landing Stage; The Royal Group, the West India, Millwall, East India, St. Katherine's, and London Docks. On the south bank were the Surrey Commercial Docks with extensive timber yards.

Hundreds of dumb lighters or swim barges were employed on the river and in the docks, usually under tow, but sometimes handled by a sole lighterman controlling the craft in the tideway with a large oar or sweep. Many substantial, well known towage and lighterage firms operated throughout the system, Vokins, Thames and Mercantile, Watkins, Braithwaite & Dean, Alexandra Towing, Sun Tugs, Tate & Lyle, and Gaselee Sons Ltd, to name but a few.

## **Going Ashore**

Our movements around sailor town were not confined to the immediate vicinity of the Royal Albert Dock.

When on board ship, it was possible to tune in to the 'wireless' and listen to the Merchant Navy Programme which was compered by Doris Hare MBE, a lady whose name was well known throughout the service. This popular radio show continued for some time after the war. Occasionally, for a change from dockland, some people would head 'up west' to the Merchant Navy Club which occupied premises in Rupert Street, off the Tottenham Court Road, or to the Lyceum Dance Hall near the top of the Strand.

Each evening, small groups of two, three or four, all off watch, would congregate in various cabins preparing, to the accompaniment of suitable liquid refreshment and ribaldry, for the evening routine of 'shave, shampoo and shove off ashore'. There followed a trudge to the dock gate and a visit to the 'first and last'. For those able and willing to splash out, a taxi might have been ordered to meet them at the foot of the gangway, whisking them away, full of the joys of spring, to the first and last outside the gate of some other dock. The area around the West India Dock gate for example, provided infinitely more colourful entertainment. There, just outside the dock gate stood two well known public houses. On the right, the 'Blue Posts', and on the left, the 'Railway Tavern', always known as 'Charlie Browns' where the ground floor bars and a form of museum upstairs were cluttered with a variety of relics and mementoes, stuffed monkeys and so forth, brought to London and presented to the original Charlie Brown over a long period by seamen from sailing ship days. It seemed to be a maritime equivalent to 'Dirty Dicks' establishment in Bishopsgate, in the City. Some additional notoriety attached to Charlie Browns as the result of the murder on the premises of an American seaman the previous year, 1944.

Pennyfields, then the heart of London's Chinese community, was close by, and the Eastern atmosphere was obvious. Nowadays, the Chinese have moved from the area.

At the top of West India Dock Road, and well known to students at King Edward VII Nautical College, and to inmates of the drab, brick built Sailors Home, known not surprisingly, as 'the stack of bricks' stood two more well established hostelries, the 'Great Eastern Hotel', and the 'Star of the East'. I once happened to be standing at a bus stop outside the former, when suddenly, a diminutive, tearful, and highly inebriated Irish gentleman emerged from within, flung his arms round me, and chokingly declared "The Pope is dead". In fact, he was not. Adjacent to the Star of the East was to me, the creepiest bus stop in London. One stepped off the bus and almost into the window of Francis and Chris Walters, East End undertakers, always brightly illuminated to display a selection of coffins, candles, and other morbid accoutrements of their trade.

It was only a short walk along Poplar High Street from the West India Dock gate to one of our favourite centres of culture, the Queens Theatre, Poplar, widely known as the 'Sods Opera', Sailors Own Dramatic Society. Surrounded by a strong Edwardian music hall atmosphere, it is the only theatre I have visited in which one could stand and drink while watching the show. The seats in the stalls were separated from a long bar on the right hand side only by a glass partition, enabling thirsty patrons to prop themselves up and watch events on stage or, perhaps even more exciting, observe the antics of other culture vultures in the stalls seats. Members of the orchestra appeared to me to bear a striking resemblance to the types I had seen working in the ship's holds earlier in the day, notwithstanding their disguise of

ill-fitting boiled shirts, twin screw ties, and black jackets.

The star of the show was an actress called Norma Dorne, to whom the audience warmed, giving the impression of having known her for years. In fact, as avid readers of the Sunday papers, they were very familiar with the young lady, and also her mother, with whom she featured in reports of a prominent, rather scandalous court case in London. Implicated also in the real life drama was a gentleman by the name of Earl Hakim, not of course a Peer of the Realm, but I think, a Yank, and the disappearance of a valuable ring. The story and its publicity provided an ideal background for a steady flow of ribald remarks from the quick witted and unsympathetic cockney audience.

One evening, I enjoyed a show at the Stoll Theatre, in Kingsway, which sadly was demolished years ago.

On Armistice Day 1945, I joined the crowds assembled in Whitehall for the first Remembrance Day service held there since 1938.

### **A Kind Invitation**

In sharp contrast to the Sods Opera came a kind invitation to spend an evening at home with a former fellow cadet at the Department of Navigation, Southampton, Midshipman Martin Attlee of the Blue Funnel Line, to whom home meant 10, Downing Street, the house into which his parents had moved following his fathers appointment as Prime Minister after the 'Khaki' election in July 1945. Invited also was Mike Brace, a former Southampton cadet who was commencing a cadetship in Silver Line Ltd, but completed his career as Master in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service. In training, Martin had been our senior by one term.

Having met Martin Attlee at the corner of Downing Street and Whitehall, we were admitted into the hall of No. 10 with its distinctive black and white check floor, now so frequently seen on TV. Gates or railings across the entrance to Downing Street were not then considered a necessity, and a certain quiet dignity prevailed in Downing Street. Later, in Harold Wilson's Premiership, it was invaded by the beer and sandwich brigade, and nowadays, a setting is provided for a standard comedy act as contemporary politicians, protestors, photographers, and policemen hover around the front door before making a beeline towards the waiting microphones and TV cameras.

A lift took us to the families flat, where we were met by Mrs Attlee. Later, the Prime Minister joined us accompanied by another guest, Monsieur Leon Blum, the Socialist Prime Minister of France 1936/37, a very tall, stooping man who spoke only little English. Shamefully, we, which included Mr Attlee, spoke no French. Mrs Attlee however, was making a determined effort to improve her French.

Following an enjoyable dinner in a small dining room, which was prepared and served by young women in the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) attached to the No. 10 household, during which any language difficulties seem to have been overcome, we all joined in a game much favoured by the Attlee family. I cannot recall its name, although it was very similar to bagatelle.

Although in May 1945, Mr Attlee was still, under Churchill, Deputy Prime Minister, Martin described the unwanted and to him, embarrassing attention which on VE Day he received from press photographers and news hawks in I think, Halifax, Canada, when it became known that he was in port on board a Blue Funnel vessel.

Most regrettably, an invitation to Chequers, for which the family seemed to hold much affection, could not be accepted. We sailed from London, and I never again met Martin Attlee, who left the sea in 1950. He succeeded to his fathers peerage, and his own son is now the third Earl Attlee.

About himself, Clement Attlee once wrote:

*"Some said, a non starter,*

*Many thought they were smarter,*

*But, he ended PM, CH, and OM,*

*An Earl, and a Knight of the Garter".*

On my return to the ship, the Chief officer asked where I had been? When I enlightened him, I have no doubt

he concluded that I had in reality spent the evening in the Roundhouse, or Sods Opera, and had had one or more too many. Next morning, he related my story to Chippy in order to obtain the opinion of that sage on the alleged departure from the norm.

A constant form of entertainment was provided by the ever changing scene in the docks and on the River Thames, combined with the variety of shore side activities, and a humorous but human element was added by the variety of colourful characters whose livings depended on 'all us big steamers'.

Many traditional sprit-sail barges with their russet coloured, easily brailed sails, still traded between the Thames and its estuary, and ports in Suffolk, Essex and Kent. In fact, for some years after 1945, the Post Office maintained a postal delivery service for families living on board barges, the delivery postman being provided with his own motor launch in place of a bicycle.



Legend tells us that after one of these craft had made fast alongside a smart, white hulled P&O liner, an altercation took place between the Chief Officer of the liner and the Skipper of the sailing barge, which in coming alongside, had disfigured some of the liners white paint. During the course of the argument, the liners Captain peered over the side, anxious to learn what was going on. The barges Skipper, on sighting the Captain, pointed to the liner's Chief Officer, and asked "Whose that \*\*\*\* ?

"That's my Chief Officer" replied the Captain, who then noticed a fat lady wearing a print dress, sitting on the hatch cover of the barge, knitting, and asked "Whose that woman?"

"That", said the bargee, "is *my* Chief Officer, and", pointing to the liner's Chief Officer, "Wot I do to 'er, is wot you want to do to 'im". There the argument ended!

Also available to those who kept their eyes open was a high degree of practical, professional education, providing a sound base for the future.

*Having finally discharged her aromatic cargo of wet hides, "City of Windsor" sails light ship to the United States.*

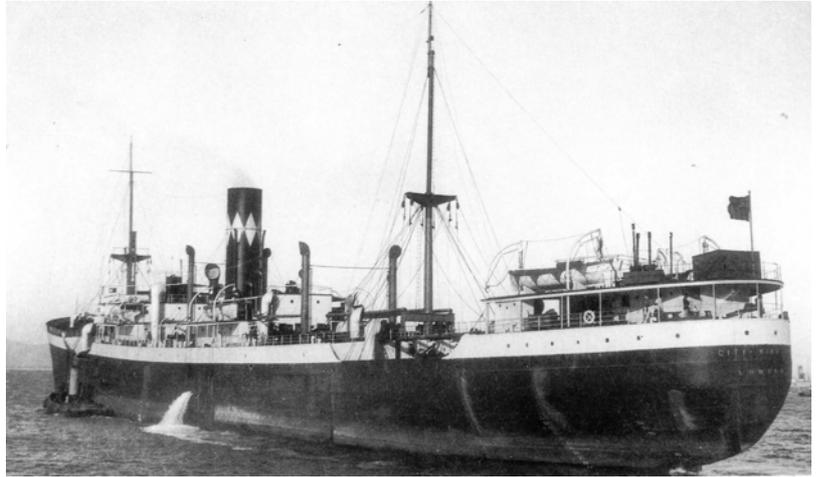
### **Bound for Philadelphia in the Morning**

Following the disembarkation of the Trinity House Pilot off Dungeness, sea conditions in the channel worsened. I was ordered to report to the Second Officer, Mr Graham, with whom I would remain on watch until given further instructions, and to whom it must have been obvious that I was feeling far from well. Nevertheless 'Murdo', with the arrival on the bridge of his lunch break relief, took a fiendish delight in proclaiming to me his intention to go down to the saloon and "wade through the menu", an announcement that precipitated my first experience of mal-de-mer.

Some days afterwards, having recovered and become accustomed to the fairly heavy Atlantic swell, I experienced my first serious shipboard accident. The Indian deck crew were, as the scrap deck log book used to record, 'variously employed' about the ship. The First Tindal, or bosuns mate, together with his son, one of the kalassies, or sailors, was working in No.2 hold, sweeping and generally squaring-up the tween deck. Regrettably, not all the wooden hatchboards covering the deep void into the lower hold were in place and. as a result of an exceptionally heavy roll caused by the swell, the younger man lost his balance, and fell a considerable distance to the ceiling, or bottom of the lower hold,

sustaining fatal injuries. He was only 18 years old. The next day, in grey, stormy Atlantic weather, the young man was buried at sea. For his father, who had to remain in the ship for some months, it was a tragedy.

"Board of Trade Sports", the description applied to the statutory requirement to carry out lifeboat and fire drills, were also experienced for the first time. These commenced on Saturday afternoon at the inconvenient time of 4 p.m. which, for those off watch, meant getting out of bed or off the settee, donning a life jacket, and proceeding to one's appointed lifeboat either on the boat deck, or lower bridge. The lifeboats were wooden, clinker built types, suspended from radial davits by three-fold manilla rope purchases.



Boat drill was followed by fire drill, signalled by the prolonged ringing of the ship's bell on the forecastle head, followed by individual strokes which indicated the position of the fire. For example, fire at No.2 hold, 2 strokes of the bell. Having interpreted this alarm signal, all hands galloped away from the lifeboats, and reassembled at the scene of the imaginary conflagration in the guise of enthusiastic firefighters. In fact, however, the majority seemed to be spare dicks, who loafed about until the arrival of an individual completely disguised by a smoke helmet, and attached to a lifeline, extracted from the Siebe Gorman box. This apparition was supported by the hose party, whose leader held the hose nozzle pointing over the ship's side until a trickle of water appeared. At this disappointment a messenger would be despatched to alert 'Nichy Hai's'\* man in the engine room that 'force' on deck was urgently required and, in due course and to general applause, a respectable plume of water would appear, thus signalling the end of the games for another week, weather permitting. This Dad's Army set up could not be compared with the very realistic fire-fighting courses compulsorily attended by present day seafarers.

A further diversion which, I discovered, fitted into the same category of nuisance value to afternoon sleepers as B.O.T. sports, was the obligatory congregation of all hands on deck in order to exchange fraternal greetings with the crew of any of the company's vessels we chanced to encounter on the high seas. The game was initiated by the Radio Officer who came across the "City of Somewhere" on the air. In great secrecy, her position was obtained and communicated to the Captain. These details gave him something to think about, and he would commandeer the chartroom, do some plotting and simple mathematics before announcing gravely "We should be passing the 'Somewhere' at about 3 o'clock." This exciting news spread through the ship like wildfire. Some company bumf would be consulted in order to discover who might be on board the other vessel, who was in command, which ship was the senior, and so on. At the trysting time, Europeans and Indians alike entered into the spirit of the occasion, standing on deck, or on the hatch covers and waving heartily to the faceless mariners sailing in the opposite direction. Most of the 'Company's men" seemed to find it exciting, but there were some to whom it was like an obligatory visit to Lenin's tomb.

As we approached the American coast. I was told to rejoin the Second Officer's watch, from 1200 to 1600 hours and again from midnight to 0100. "Keep your eyes skinned" ordered Murdo Graham, "We expect to pick up Cape May light during the watch". This was exciting news, my first sight of foreign soil. Some time later, the quiet of the night was shattered by an almost blood-curdling shriek in a distinctive Highland accent which I interpreted to mean "I've seen the light". Its source was Murdo, who, realising that I lurked in the corner of the wheelhouse, said, "Angus", not my name, but in the agony of the moment as near as dammit, - "Go down and tell the Captain I've seen the light". I knocked timidly on the Captain's door, and waited to hear a couple of grunts before commencing my speech. "Good morning sir. the second mate says he's seen the light". From within the blankets a welsh voice asked "Has he got religion?"

Feeling that my efforts to communicate this vital information were not being fully appreciated I ignored this question and started afresh. "The second mate has picked up Cape May light, sir". "Bloody good job" said the Welsh voice "He's been steaming towards it for the past two weeks". At this juncture I muttered something like "Yes sir", and decided the best thing I could do was return to the wheelhouse and try to make myself scarce, keeping my eyes 'skinned' for whatever else might happen before 4 o'clock, and looking forward with as much intent as Christopher Columbus might have done to discovering what America looked like in daylight.

Elderly seafarers speak or write of ships in a strange way, getting excited when describing a ship, the on board accommodation, their shipmates, and adventures experienced at sea or ashore; memories not necessarily important in themselves, but just for the fact that they stuck. It is said the memory grows sharper with age. Perhaps however, in the

relatively carefree days of youth, many memories are first forged as a result of contrast, which before the days of mass tourism was a vital part of travel experience.

I was now almost constantly made aware of the contrasts between my erstwhile lifestyle and that which I had recently embraced as something akin to a 1945 type package tourist. Once the ship was alongside at Philadelphia, I eagerly awaited an opportunity to go ashore and experience some of the contrasts between that port and London.

Never, for example, had I heard advertising on BBC radio, but in Philadelphia, adverts came on every few seconds over what seemed to be countless rival stations, and I soon learned to remember that:-

*"If it's kissing that you're missing,  
We can give you good advice.  
Buy a tube of Colgate's toothpaste.  
Cleans your teeth, and keeps breath nice"*

A similar pain in the neck was:-

*"Ooh, ooh, good  
Ooh, ooh, good,  
Campbell's Noodle - Poodle soup.  
Is ooh, ooh good.*

Prospective investors were constantly reminded that :-

*"Frugal MacDougall banks with First National."*

This prosperous, canny Scot could also be seen on buses and hoardings. complete with hairy knees, Tam O'Shanter bonnet and Harry Lauder stick, repeating his advice.

Dock workers in London, although never short of something to say, seemed, however, after six years of war, to present a picture of a rather pinched and miserable species, clad in drab ex army greatcoats, cloth caps and mufflers, in direct contrast to the huge, smiling blackmen on the Philadelphia waterfront, wearing good quality bright clothing, donkey jackets, an assortment of eye catching headgear, and carrying well filled lunch boxes.

For the pound sterling the rate of exchange was favourable, one pound being worth U.S. \$4.1, making the proverbial dollar worth almost exactly five bob. (25 Pence).

### **A Very Des-Res**

*"Little boxes made of ticky tacky  
and they all look just the same".*

The words of the popular song describing many shoreside housing schemes might be applied to the living areas provided on board ships similar to the 'City of Windsor', in which European officers and ratings spent most of their leisure time on lengthy voyages in weather conditions as varied as high summer in Calcutta docks to midwinter in Eastern Canada.

The steel pens in which mariners lived were not structured by floors, surrounded by walls, and covered by a ceiling, nor did they always have windows. They were instead held together by a deck, surrounded by bulkheads, topped by a deckhead. Natural light was admitted, and natural stench emitted through a porthole, a skylight, or a ventilator. The

various rival factions into which the inhabitants were divided were interconnected by means of alleyways, and companionways, the equivalent of corridors and stairways ashore.

Similar, however, to houses on land, these dwellings differed in location, fixtures and fittings, only a few qualifying for the description 'des res'. Some, for example the spacious room sited on the lower bridge and occupied by the Captain in solitary splendour, were indeed well situated in a quiet cul-de-sac, ensuring a degree of seclusion and guaranteeing stunning sea views. Others, more down market, were in built up areas or even busy thoroughfares frequented, when in port, by thieves and other unwelcome types, thus requiring the port hole curtain to be kept drawn in order to avoid eyeball to eyeball confrontations between the inmates and peeping toms exhibiting, under the guise of 'shore labour', lewd and criminal expressions in keeping with their kleptomaniac propensities.

Most seafarers respected the privacy of their shipmates, and one's cabin became one's home. Many seamen can recall with with astonishing clarity, fifty years or more after leaving a ship, where they lived, who lived next door, and so forth. Some ships carried a higher proportion than others of 'old women', for whom the gossip relating to everyday doings or non-doings provided an ideal setting for a maritime 'soap'.

For the Master, officers, and European ratings, the accommodation, or living area, was, although basic, adequate and comfortable, and I cannot remember hearing any complaints about living conditions.

The dining room, known as the saloon, was for the officers, the only communal area in the ship. In no way however, could it be described as similar to a Royal Naval Wardroom, or an Army Officers' Mess. Nobody would have considered the saloon as 'home'. Essentially, it was a dining room. It was not a venue where the officers gathered socially to share drinks or jokes, play games, enjoy conversation, and generally relax. Christmas Day might have been an exception.

Everyone, except the five Europeans who failed to qualify for officer status, to which in any event they did not aspire, took meals in this Holy of Holies, dressed in some semblance of uniform, but between meals, the saloon remained empty, rather like a public house between 'hours', the two long tables being covered by large dark green tablecloths. Enhanced by heavy teak doors, and brass lamps, the tables, chairs and elegant large mirrored sideboard always looked inviting and I often wondered why this fine room was not utilised and enjoyed for purposes other than messing.

The saloon was situated in the centre of the bridge block of accommodation at main deck level, its heavy, brass rimmed portholes facing forward. Close by, on the starboard side, was the Chief Officers room, which served as his home, office, and unofficial store room for items such as torch batteries, small shackles, skeins of sewing twine, and other sought after goodies, which, as he knew from experience, had a habit of 'walking'.

The Chief Officers neighbours, sharing a much smaller cabin, or room as it was usually called, were two cadets, Judd and the writer. Continuing aft along the alleyway, were a small ships office, a bathroom and w.c.

On the port side, adjacent to the saloon, lived the Purser/chief steward, and off the port side alleyway were three small, double berthed cabins in which passengers could be carried. Spare rooms of that type, in good quality cargo liners, were at a premium in the immediate post-war years when most passenger liners were still engaged in Government, rather than owners' service. Cadet Humphries occupied a small 'inside' cabin opposite these passengers cabins.

Abaft the saloon was the officers' pantry, not meant to be raided by the officers, but only to serve the saloon. It was absurdly small, but contained a domestic refrigerator, of equally absurd dimensions in which could be stored about six cans of beer, kept chilled for the exclusive benefit of our Commander. For visiting nabobs from the shore, to be of such standing as to qualify for a can of cold beer in the Captain's room was, without doubt, a status symbol beyond the wildest aspirations of anybody who actually sailed in the ship.

Further aft, around the funnel and under the boat deck, were two alleyways, port and starboard. On the port side, the forward room housed 'Nichy Hai', chief of all the engineers, followed by the third, fourth, and fifth of that ilk, and their communal wash house. In the starboard alleyway, from forward, lived the second engineer, second officer, third officer, and carpenter. From these alleyways, steel doors allowed access to the engine room.

At the after end of this block of accommodation, between the two alleyways, was a four berth room inhabited by the Quartermasters. Its door, and one small porthole faced aft, but in fine or hot weather, they could open a skylight in the deckhead opening onto the boat deck. The room was sparsely furnished, having four metal lockers screwed to the bulkhead, beneath which was one long settee. Alongside the opposite bulkhead were four bunks, two up, two down. To provide basic privacy, the bunks were separated at their head or feet by a canvas partition. In warmer climes, a small fan served their needs and, for cold weather use, a large steam radiator was fitted.

This provided, for four men, a type of mobile home which moved slowly but steadily through constantly changing scenes, from calm to storm conditions, from tropical to sub-zero temperatures, from Eastern to Western and Northern to Southern hemispheres until the expiry of their two year lease.

To one side of their living room, the QM's had a separate, small messroom fitted with a table, two wooden benches, and a deep, old fashioned, porcelain sink. On the other side was a small single lavatory. The Quartermasters had no bathing facilities nor access to a bathroom. This slight problem was, however, overcome by means of a small hose pipe, a bucket, and a stirrup pump of the type used to extinguish incendiary bombs. The hose end, fitted with a spray rose, was led through the metal cage protecting the deck head light glass, and for showering purposes, water was pumped through this Heath Robinson contraption from the bucket. Each QM, on joining the ship was issued with a personal bucket, and sweat rag.

The Radio Officer lived in solitary splendour in a small deckhouse perched on the after end of the boat deck, adjacent to the radio room. Although somewhat remote, this was a pleasant situation.

The most des res, however, situated in a high altitude, much sought after area, was that occupied by the Master of the vessel, Captain 'Daddy' Mathias; comprising one large square room in its own grounds on the exclusive lower bridge estate, through which, although there was a right of way towards the bridge and wheelhouse, loitering was not encouraged.

None of the cabins were what, today, would be called 'en-suite', and in this respect the Captain was less fortunate than anyone on board. Years after the ship entered service in 1923, as a result of some brilliant afterthought, a small bathroom/w.c had been built on the port side of the lower bridge or 'Captain's deck'. Whenever therefore, the need arose, whether by day or night, in fair weather or foul, the great man had to brave the elements and head across an unprotected stretch of deck from his living room to his bathroom, unless, unknown by the lower orders, he made some alternative arrangement. He too, qualified for a company bucket. His, or, more precisely, his bathroom's waterworks, plumbed as they were into a tank under the bridge, were serviced daily by one of the 'Jackies' by means of buckets of water decanted through a filling or sounding pipe on the port wing of the navigating bridge above. Nevertheless, the Captain was the only person on board who could enjoy the luxury of a private bathroom.

In each officer's cabin, carved somewhere into the steelwork, was the statutory legend "Certified to accommodate one seaman".

Only cold running salt water was dispensed through the taps in the communal bathrooms around the officer's quarters and it was, therefore, necessary to carry salt water soap. No hot running fresh water was available. To obtain hot water, the procedure was, first, to take a bucket or other receptacle along the deck to the after end of the midships accommodation, outside the QM's quarters, where a fresh water pump was situated. Secondly, fill the bucket. Thirdly, carry the bucket forward to the galley, and pour the cold water into the steam heated boiler. Finally, extract from the boiler the amount of water put in cold, and carry the boiling water to one's cabin. There was however, attached to this time consuming, but simple exercise, an inevitable embuggerance factor. Frequently, the pump was useless, drawing only air, and in need of priming. This meant roaming around and cadging some fresh water with which to prime the pump, after removing the large nut leading to it's gizzards. The borrowed water, had of course, to be returned, and when water was being taken from the galley boiler, the chief cook and his assistants watched closely to ensure that no more water was removed than had been put in. On reaching one's cabin, it was usually found that the water was too hot to use, and a second trip to the pump was required which meant that another bucket was needed.

Every cabin was equipped with a 'compactum', a vital piece of furniture for washing purposes; it was a wooden creation, about six feet tall and two feet in width, securely screwed to the bulkhead. At face level it held a square mirror, hinged, so as to provide behind it a cupboard for shaving gear and so forth. Below the mirror was a hinged door which, when pulled downwards lay flat and at right angles to the user, and exhibited a bowl for washing purposes. After use, the door was simply pulled up once more and, hey-ho, the water was decanted into a tin which reposed in the lowest compartment of the compactum. The system was adequate, although people frequently tipped up the bowl having failed to ensure beforehand that the tin underneath was empty. This omission led to the cabin's deck being flooded with slimy, soapy water, on top of which had often been floating lumps of soap, fag ends, or orange peel. In order to avoid this catastrophe, the can, when almost full, had to be carried out onto the open deck from where it's contents could be tipped into the 'big locker', in other words, overboard. It was imperative, in order to avoid getting ones 'own back', to ensure that the can was emptied over the lee side, and not to windward. The cadets water waste cans were scrutinised by the Captain on his routine Sunday morning inspection of the ship, thus eliminating the real risk of the can becoming encrusted with slime and emitting odours even more foul than usual.

Throughout the accommodation, the doors were made of teak wood, and could be secured in the open position by means of sturdy brass hooks. They were also fitted with strong brass locks, and, in the upper sections, round, revolving brass ventilators were fitted. The lower panels had been mutilated when, as a war-time measure, teak panels had been replaced by a type of plywood in order to create an emergency 'crash panel'. Together with large, pointed quick release rafts, attached to the fore and main mast shrouds, the crash panels were retained in place for some time after the end of hostilities.

Other basic cabin fittings included a small fan, a settee fitted to one bulkhead, water bottle and tumbler in a wooden frame, and a metal wind-shute. The latter was so constructed as to fit snugly into the open porthole aperture, hopefully to scoop in cool, fresh air as the ship steamed through tropical seas at 10 or 11 knots. Air conditioning was unheard of, and anyway, who would need it when we already had a wind-shute? Similarly, washing machines were surplus to requirements when everyone already had a company bucket.

Also non-existent was refrigerated space for the storage of sea-stocks of fresh meat, fish, or vegetables. These were all carried in an ice-box erected on deck at the break of the poop, abaft all the cargo hatches. Once daily, the ice-box was opened by the Chief Steward who, with the Chief Cook extracted the stores immediately required. The huge chunks of ice inside the box seemed always to possess a dirty brown tint, and traces of old vegetables, fish scales, and soot from the ship's "woodbine" funnel floated in the melted ice at the bottom of the box. This system seemed again, adequate, and we suffered no digestive problems.

*Hamish Roberts*

