

Day Tripping

Captain John Bowden recollects the popular round the Island trips with Red Funnel in the sixties

In the early to late 60's, Red Funnel was still engaged in the excursion trade, carried out by their two ships "Balmoral" & "Vecta". These two ships were later superseded due to the advent of the massive increase in car ownership, and the arrival of more specialised car ferries on the scene. There had been a previous "Balmoral", acquired in 1900 and scrapped in 1949. She was a ship of 471 GT, and capable of 20 knots. This speed allowed her to preserve the record of fastest cross-channel trip across to France for many years from then up to the between war years.

The 60's marked the end of an era. I had the good fortune to spend the last few years of the later Balmoral's career with Red Funnel, employed in the various excursions in local waters, notably in the highly popular around the Island trips; a twice weekly affair in the Summer months. The contrast with my previous voyages world-wide was at times quite startling, but in common with numerous friends at sea, the venture into married life dictated a change of scene! It was, however, a busy and interesting life.

A brief description of a day in the trade may be of interest, which would commence at seven in the morning with two hours of washing down and cleaning, plus the loading of quantities of stores and sufficient fresh water to provide for several hundred people over the next twelve to thirteen hours. At 0900 we would depart for Ryde, usually heavily laden with some hundreds of eager sun-seeking passengers. The itinerary on a "Round the Island" day (fare in the early 60's, 15 shillings/ 75 pence), took us firstly to Ryde, where some people would disembark, others boarding. Then it was across to the two Southsea piers at South Parade and Clarence pier and a further exchange of people. Passenger figures were much enhanced in those days by the dreaded landladies of the various hotels desiring to have their guests absent for the whole day!

Leaving Southsea, we would proceed to Sandown, a place needing great care at times near low water, the depth allowing us mere few inches beneath our keel. This meant the occasional cancellation of our visit to

the town. It was then on to Shanklin and Ventnor. On rare occasions adverse weather made it necessary to proceed carefully after leaving Ventnor, running down towards St. Catherines Point to observe the sea state and decide upon the wisdom of carrying on round the Island. Should we decide to cancel, the possibly disappointed passengers became convinced of the wisdom of our decision after a few heavy lurches in the increasingly nasty sea. Some passengers, perhaps hardier than the rest, would express displeasure at our obvious cowardice, but the possibility of injury to people and ship outweighed their opinion. Once having decided to go on, it was press on regardless, as re-crossing the heavy sea was not a good option. All



being well then, we would proceed up the Western Solent, arriving back at Ryde at around 1600. We would then recommence the shuttle to Southsea and thence the back of the Island again. As the evening advanced we would be back in Ryde for our last call, picking up those of our charges who had opted for the whole day on the Island.

At 2030 or shortly after, it was off on the final leg to Southampton. On a good day, this trip, complete with sparks flying from the funnel, and having achieved a good seventeen knots (speed restrictions permitting), we would arrive at the Royal Pier, disembark our many hundreds of passengers, and secure the ship for the night. For most of our people, it would have been a memorable day, and worthy of remembrance. Some, no doubt, would have hair-raising tales to tell of their hazardous voyage across the previously imagined calm waters of the Solent and the seas around the Isle of Wight. Whatever their thoughts, there is no doubt that those somewhat less sophisticated days produced a great deal of enjoyment and good memories.

A final note: in 1999, I joined "Balmoral" for her fiftieth anniversary cruise. The old girl was as good as new, a tribute to the builders and the men who sailed in her for all those years. I was extremely lucky to have participated in what is now a by-gone era.

JOHN BOWDEN