

## Here there be Monsters

*Here is an interesting excerpt from "Cachalots and Messmates, "A Brief History of The Southampton Master Mariners' Club", written by Commodore D.M.MacLean, DSC, RD, RNR, and published in 1973.*

11th July 1972. By way of implementing the friendly aims of the Club, the author visited the Club's oldest surviving member, Captain C. H. Watson, O.B.E., on this, his 91st birthday, and found him "Hale and hearty from yardarm to yardarm".

He joined the Club in its foundation year, 1928, and although never an Officer of it he has always been a staunch supporter. Captain Watson (or "Charlie" as he is affectionately called) joined the Southampton Pilotage service in 1912 and retired from it in 1952, having been "Choice" Pilot for both Canadian Pacific and Union Castle lines for many years.

His memory goes back to the old sailing Pilot-Cutter days; and long before the oil refinery and storage tanks appeared on Southampton Water. "We were constantly on the move, piloting all kinds of steam and sailing craft in my young days," he declared, before releasing a flood of interesting anecdotes about his early seafaring days.

Flicking through the faded pages of an old Seaman's Discharge Book, he showed me, with a smile, one engagement entry for the year 1900 which read: "Rating: Second Cook" of Steam Yacht *KEMPION*, engaged in cruising in the Norwegian Fjords. Rate of pay £7 per month.

During this period, Charlie explained, the shipping economy of this country was at a very low ebb. Officers with Master Mariner's Certificates were serving in ships' forecastles - glad to be in a job of any kind.

But one of his proudest memories is, that when he was 19 he served as Able Seaman on board King Edward VII's graceful yacht, *BRITANNIA*, in her exciting racing heyday. His principal duties aboard *BRITANNIA*

were "Mainsheet-and-Backstays-man", when racing; and, more important, he was always directly responsible for the personal safety of Her Majesty Queen Alexandra whenever she was embarked in the Royal Yacht.

Among the more unusual experiences which Charlie related to me was the following incident.

Shortly after leaving *BRITANNIA* he signed on as Able Seaman in the well-known 1,300 ton full-rigged ship-yacht *VALHALLA*, owned by Lord Crawford. One morning in the spring of 1902 in mid-Indian Ocean while on passage in her from Aden to Singapore an incident occurred which left an indelible impression on Charlie's youthful memory. The crew were working about the decks in their usual manner when the helmsman reported a sail well out on the starboard bow, whereupon the skipper, Captain John Caws, was promptly called and *VALHALLA* bore away to close the object, and Charlie went aloft into the fore rigging in order to get a better view.

Before long all hands and the Cook had mustered by the lee rail after someone had said something about the "queer-ness" and the absence of any kind of movement around the reported sail. Hearing the unusual commotion on deck, Lord Crawford, together with the two eminent scientists who were his guests on board, hastened to the fore-deck and, as the ship closed to within about 20 feet of the strange object, it was clearly seen to be a mottled dark brown coloured fish (or mammal) of reptilian form

and about 25 feet in length with a serrated dorsal fin of about three or four feet in height, and a proportionate snake-like head. It somehow gave the impression of being old, but at the same time, of immense and sinister power, and there was an uncanny feeling about disturbing the monster's apparent unaware-ness of their presence; it seemed as if it were dozing in the morning sunshine.

There was very little wind and *VALHALLA*, under sail, made hardly a ripple at her bow. This might possibly have accounted for the creature's lack of awareness of the ship's proximity.

Presently Lord Crawford ordered his valet to fetch his elephant-gun, but by the time the weapon was loaded the awesome creature had reared its head and slowly dived into the depths. It probably had been disturbed when the shadow of *VALHALLA'S* sails fell across it or possibly by the now closer sound of her bow-wave faint though the latter was.

As a sort of postscript to his story Captain Watson added that while watching a television programme a few years ago he was very surprised to hear the above incident sketchily described but mentioning the name of his old ship, *VALHALLA*. The programme also included a report of a sighting of a marine

monster by a Naval vessel in the Indian Ocean some time around the same era.

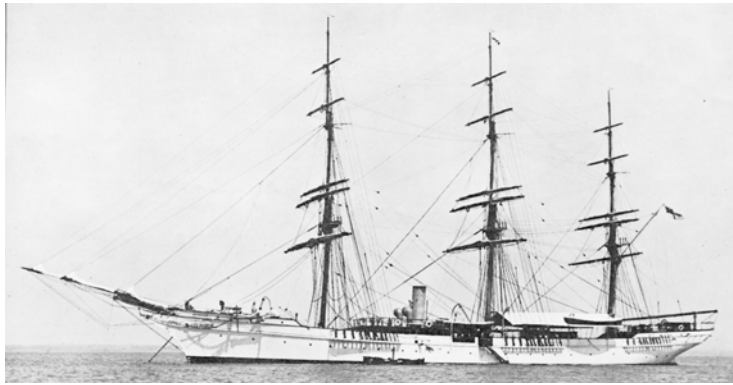
After obtaining his Master's Certificate in 1907 he got command of Sir Frederick Preston's famous sailing yacht, *MODWENA* and, judging from his colourful accounts of his various cruises in her he must have been a very competent and resourceful seaman.

Paradoxically enough, although *MODWENA* was a purely sailing vessel and therefore without engines or propeller, her owner's wealth

derived from the manufacture of ship's propellers! Sir Frederick, at that time, was Chairman of the world-famous Stone's Propeller Foundry at Deptford.

When asked for his recipe for health and longevity Charlie replied: "I eat well; and always keep a ball of well-tarred spunyarn by my bedside; it keeps off bronchitis and 'flu germs.'" !

He now lives in happy retirement tending his attractive little garden by the river Hamble.



The auxiliary full-rigged ship-yacht, *VALHALLA*, owned by Lord Crawford, in which Charlie Watson served as an A.B. in 1902.

*Photo by Beken & Son, Cowes*



*I could find very little information of the VALHALLA on the internet but at [www.strangemag.com/definitiveseaserpent.html](http://www.strangemag.com/definitiveseaserpent.html) there is an account of the sighting by the two scientists on board. They were Michael J. Nicholl and E.G.B.Meade-Waldo, both experienced British naturalists and Fellows of the Zoological Society of London. They date the sighting as Dec.7 1905 at 1015 am and put it at 15 miles east of the mouth of Brazil's Parahiba River. Their account is recorded in the 1906 edition of the Society's Proceedings and in Nicoll's 1908 book "Three Voyages of A Naturalist."*

*There is also very scant information with regard to the MODWENA or of Sir Frederick Preston.*

*Ed.*