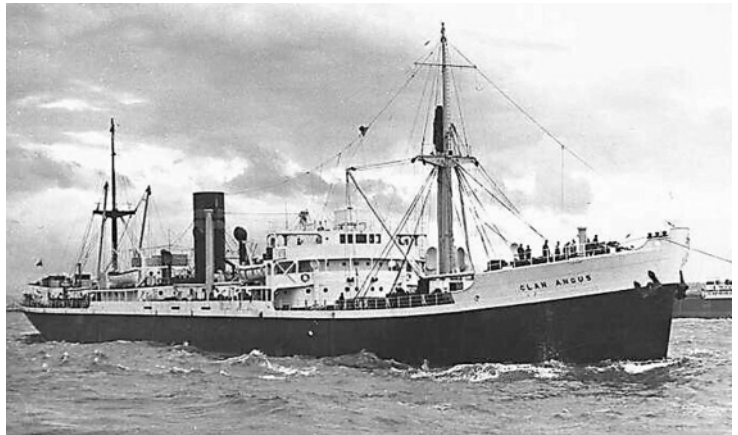


## **My First Ship**

*Another 'first tripper' account, or perhaps a 'first shipper' one, this time from **Richard Olden** and yet again with Clan Line. His ship was very similar to the CLAN ALPINE, which ended up in a paddy field near Chittagong during a cyclone. (Captain Les Morris's brother John was third engineer on her at the time and his account was published here in issues 27 & 28.)*

My cadetship was spent mainly in the SS "CLAN ANGUS" (ex "EMPIRE PRINCE"), a 1942 utility-built 7,030 GRT general cargo vessel. She had a triple-expansion steam engine, coal-fired boilers, and a speed of 11 knots. Her officers were British, consisting of the Master, three Deck Officers, five Engineer Officers, Radio Officer, Chief Steward, Carpenter and two Deck Cadets. And like all Clan Line ships, she had a Lascar crew.



I had had pre-sea training at "Pangbourne", and after a successful interview at Clan Line's head office in London, I joined the "CLAN ANGUS" in Govan Dry Dock, Glasgow in October 1946. As I boarded her, a new Clan Line funnel was being fitted, and gun mountings and other war fittings were being removed. Unbeknown to me then, I would be in her for four voyages - nearly two and a half years - including a voyage of twelve months. Also, I would be sailing with the same Master, Chief Officer, Chief and Second Engineers, Radio Officer and Carpenter. The Second and Third Deck Officers would also be the same for nearly two years.

I had been kitted out by my parents, who paid my travel expenses to Glasgow, where my career began. During WWII Merchant Navy personnel received "war risk bonuses" – officers £10 per month, cadets £5 – which shipowners, at the end of hostilities, tried but failed to stop. My pay initially was £7 per month (£1 income, £5 war risk bonus while abroad, and £1 differential – reason for the last-mentioned I never discovered), and increased annually, up to £10 10s in my last year. Until Articles of Agreement were opened, officers were being paid weekly. My first pay packet, after deductions for National Health & Pensions Insurance, amounted to 2s 6d! (*That's 12½ p to all you youngsters reading this....Ed*)

After dry-docking, in daytime, we loaded general cargo for Ceylon and India. At night, for a few days, we took bunker coal, involving the time-consuming job of warping across the dock evenings and mornings. Cargoes from Glasgow included heavy machinery, often railway locomotives and rolling stock. A particular memory I have of that cargo is of being in a 'tween deck watching whisky being stowed. Stevedores "so-called accidentally" dropped an occasional wooden case, ensuring a bottle or two broke. They caught and consumed as much neat whisky as they could, ensuring their mates in other holds got some too. No wonder we now have Health & Safety regulations, and cargo became containerized!

For navigation, "CLAN ANGUS" had magnetic compasses, a radio direction-finder, a poor echo-sounder, a Walker's Log, hand lead lines and a patent sounding machine, sextant and chronometers, and, of course, British Admiralty charts and publications. She had no gyro compass or radar. I've always considered this was ideal for learning to navigate. But, in fog, and without radar, cadets were so often on double (4-on, 4-off) watches, as they often were in coastal waters.

From Glasgow we sailed to Birkenhead - my first sea experience. "CLAN ANGUS" had a closed wheelhouse, and bridge wings fitted with canvas dodgers. Cadets, on 4-on, 4-off watches, stood out in the cold on a bridge wing, as an extra lookout. My first night watch seemed endless, I felt seasick, and wondered why ever I'd chosen to go to sea.

At Birkenhead we completed loading cargo, apart from consignments of Ammunition, which had to be loaded at Crosby Anchorage in the River Mersey. This took four hours on a Sunday morning, for which stevedores each received £16 (including Sunday overtime & danger money), plus £1 for going out to the ship. I spent the morning in the hold, sitting on boxes of ammunition, to ensure nobody smoked!

Our outward cargo included four horses, in wooden boxes on the after deck, for Madras, the first race horses exported to India after WWII. They were mares in foal (2 for the price of 1, Tesco-style!). Cadets, on day work, looked after them. Later, as Chief Officer and Master, I sailed in ships that frequently carried horses, so the experience was to prove useful. On that outward voyage we went through the Suez Canal, bunkered at Aden, and discharged cargo at Colombo, Madras, Vizagapatam and Calcutta.

Christmas is when seafarers feel separation from their families most. My first two Christmases were totally different. The first was in Calcutta. After a convivial dinner on board, I was in a party of officers that went ashore to a nightclub. Unfortunately, someone took in a hidden bottle of spirits left over from dinner, and was caught topping up glasses. We were all ejected on to the street, and had difficulty finding our way back to the ship in the middle of the night. The second was in Egypt, on sea watches. Having transited the Suez Canal during the night, we were moored to buoys in Port Said, preparing to sail. Suddenly, in the middle of the afternoon, there was an explosion. The ship shook violently. By instinct everybody rushed out on to open decks. A

bomb had exploded in a barge under the stern of an Israeli vessel, berthed immediately astern of us, causing considerable damage to her rudder. (This was a few months before the Declaration of the State of Israel.) Fortunately, we sustained no damage.

On the homeward voyage from India, my work included looking after two young leopards, two bears and four monkeys, all consigned to Hull Zoo. There was also a large Great Dane dog, we housed in an empty horse box, which I enjoyed exercising up and down the foredeck. The dog's owner - a returning British army officer - had given instructions for it to be fed 4lbs of beef daily. This for some reason annoyed our chief steward, who somehow acquired 160lbs of best-grade American beef, in the most unlikely of places, Chittagong. The officers ate the dog's beef, and the dog had our Indian mutton! For looking after animals, cadets were always handsomely rewarded by shippers, or their representatives - a welcome boost to our finances.

We arrived back in Europe in February 1947 in one of the worst winters on record. After discharging part of our cargo in London, we proceeded towards Hamburg. It was exceedingly cold. Deck officers and cadets were on "double watches" working "dog watches" (the 1600 to 2000 watch split into two, enabling watch-keepers to rotate watches evenly). We passed through buoyed channels to avoid areas yet to be cleared of war mines. The River Elbe being frozen over, we anchored outside, awaiting an icebreaker. The sea froze over at every slack water, and as tides flooded and ebbed we dragged anchor a mile or two in each direction. Visibility was poor, so we often had little idea of our position. The master was under pressure to get to Middlesbrough for our next cargo. After a couple of days, we followed an icebreaker into the Elbe, and a pilot boarded us off Bremerhaven. In proceeding up the Elbe, from time to time we got stuck in thick ice, and had to reverse engine to get clear of it. The ship frequently shuddered from hitting ice, and at Hamburg we had difficulty getting alongside our berth. During discharge of cargo, some German men came on board selling valuables in exchange for cigarettes. I acquired a virtually new pair of Zeiss 7x50 (ex U-boat) binoculars, for a few shillings-worth of duty-free cigarettes. They lasted me for about twenty years.

At Middlesbrough, an examination showed our bow plating heavily indented, with many rivets leaking, and also some propeller damage. Leaking rivets were in way of the lower forepeak tank, and the leaks were stopped by fitting 26 cement boxes. Permanent repairs had to be made at the next dry-docking.

My second voyage, with outward cargo for South Africa and Mozambique, was anticlockwise round Africa, calling at all main ports between Cape Town and Mombasa, and then Aden for bunkers. My fellow-cadet and cabin mate was taken ill in the Red Sea. He was treated by a doctor at Port Said, but it became necessary to land him to hospital in Malta. He was found to have a serious type of malaria, remained there for a considerable time, and apparently never returned to sea. We discharged some cargo at Genoa. The harbour was littered with sunken ships from WWII, and, once again, we used duty-free cigarettes as currency.

My third voyage commenced with crossing the North Atlantic in ballast, to load newsprint in Newfoundland and manufactured goods at USA east coast ports, for South Africa. Night-lighting in the UK had yet to recover from WWII's blackout, but New York, where the lights had never gone out, was an amazing sight. I spent my 19th birthday in New York, where, for about 1 US\$, I had a good evening ashore. The British Apprentice Club, off Broadway, was a popular haunt for cadets.

After discharge in South Africa, at East African ports we loaded a general cargo for Europe. At Dar es Salaam's inner anchorage I was put on night watch, alone, in charge of the bridge, with a Quartermaster on gangway duty. Supposedly it was study time, but I felt the anchorage was 'tight', and kept checking our position with magnetic compass bearings. Compass deviations were changing as our heading adjusted to wind and tide, which gave me some useful practise. One night, in the early hours, the Quartermaster appeared on the bridge, shouting "jaldi, jaldi, Sahib!" (quickly, quickly, Sir!), and then rushed back down to the gangway. I followed him down, thinking something dreadful had happened. He pointed to an enormous fish in the water that he'd caught on a thin line. He had carefully tired it out before coming to get me. Together we got it on board.

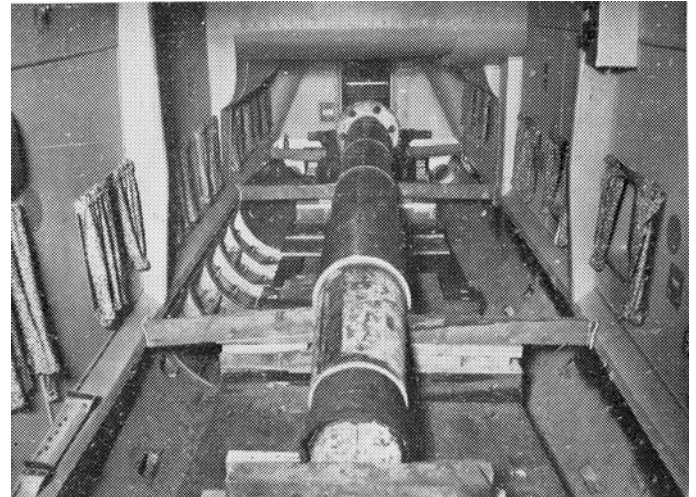
My fourth and last voyage started with a cargo from the UK to South Africa. Then, in ballast, we crossed the Indian Ocean to India, expecting loading instructions by radio. On passage, the Radio Room receiver broke down. The Radio Officer, an ex Post Office communications "morse-tapper", who had joined the MN in WWII, had only a limited knowledge of electricity. Failing to rectify the problem himself, I was asked to help (electricity being one of my better subjects). Every component inside the radio was numbered and was identifiable on a circuit diagram. Two heads proving to be better than one, we located a faulty very small capacitor. On disconnecting it, the radio came to life. Our homeward loading instructions were duly received. However, "CLAN ANGUS" was about to experience something much more serious.

At Calcutta, we moored very securely in the River Hooghley, in preparation for "bore tides". A specialized mooring gang hung-off our two bower anchors, removed three shackles from each cable, and secured us fore and aft with anchor cable to buoys - the after cables through fairleads, wrapped around our stern bits. Tidal bores in the Hooghley estuary can exceed 7 feet (2.1m) in height, and frequently destroy small boats. Vessels "whistled" as a bore passed them, warning vessels upriver of its approach. Routinely, we were at mooring stations while cables took the heavy strain.

From Calcutta we headed downriver towards Chittagong. About 120 miles from Calcutta, while I was at the helm getting steering experience in pilotage waters in a buoyed channel, the Second Engineer in the Engine Room rang "Stop" on the telegraph. The engine, which had been on full ahead, instead of running at about 65 RPM, was running like a sewing machine. We had lost our bronze propeller! We anchored and a couple of days later were towed back to Calcutta. An inspection showed our tail shaft had sheared outside the boss. Fortunately, the falling propeller hadn't damaged our rudder. We had a spare (iron) propeller on board, but no spare tail shaft. Locally there was no replacement tail shaft, and it became necessary to get one from Glasgow. It was found to be cheaper sending it by air rather than by sea. Transporting such an item (6 ¼ tons and 19' 6" long) by air had



**It's quicker by air mail**



**The prop shaft in an unusual setting**

always been by hanging it beneath an aircraft from the bomb beam, but the maximum capacity of such beams was 5 ¾ tons. Clan Line chartered a Liberator, and from Prestwick Airport, with the shaft stowed inside it, the flight took three days, requiring nine refueling stops. The replacement shaft and iron propeller were fitted in dry dock at Calcutta. By then, our homeward cargo for Europe had been cancelled.

At Chittagong and some Indian ports we loaded a cargo for USA east coast ports. At New York there was a shortage of dockers (longshoremen). The Chief Officer gave cadets time off to work as casual labour, shifting bales of hemp cargo from the quayside to sheds, using hand-trucks. We did this for a couple of days, getting paid cash in the hand, which was helpful in New York. I spent another (my 20th) birthday there, managing by train to visit relatives in Pennsylvania. On completion of discharge, we loaded a cargo of manufactured goods, similar to the previous year, for South Africa. Sea trips from New York to Cape Town took 26 days. In calm weather, at 11 knots, we often saw whales swimming at our speed, nearly alongside the ship.

After discharging the second USA cargo, in Mozambique we loaded cashew nuts for discharge and processing in India – a regular Clan Line cargo. We passed through the Maldives, which had to be in daylight because of no lighthouses. Our whistle was sounded as we approached a small island, and a white man and a few coloureds ran to the water's edge and waved. In those days nobody would have contemplated tourism or an international airport in the Maldives. Only recently, mail had been sealed in barrels and placed on board Clan ships in Durban, and by arrangement dropped overboard to waiting boats as they steamed through the Maldives. After discharging our cargo of cashew nuts, we loaded a cargo in India for the UK.

The Chief Engineer, our only certificated engineer, nearing retirement, was very experienced. Daily, after breakfast, he and the Chief Steward met outside the Cold Store in the 'tween deck beneath the Officers' Pantry, to remove frozen food for the day. The refrigeration plant was inefficient, and opening it just once a day helped to maintain the temperature, and minimize food having to be condemned. The Chief Steward and Cook were shut inside, to select what was needed, the Chief Engineer waiting outside to let them out. After removing the food, the store was closed and relocked, probably both Chief Engineer and Chief Steward having a padlock on it. I think the same performance happened with the Chilled Store next to it. Occasionally, a rumpus ensued when something extra was needed, and the Chief Engineer refused to reopen a store. When food was condemned, it had to be checked and recorded with witnesses, before jettisoning. I recollect arguments occurring over the reason for frozen/chilled food having to be condemned – the Chief Steward blaming store temperature, the Chief Engineer blaming poor quality of food, and/or the length of time it had been in store. In the tropics we occasionally got chilled water to drink, but never ice or ice-cream.

Domestic fresh water storage consisted of two 11-ton tanks in the 'tween deck, with a hand pump on the Main Deck outside the officers' galley. The After Peak was a reserve fresh water tank. Daily, an engine room pump was used to fill a header tank, for officers' use, from any of these tanks. I think the Lascars, because there were so many of them, hand-pumped all of their water - normally unlimited. If we ran short of fresh water, the hand pump was locked. Lascars were then rationed, cadets being put in charge of unlocking the pump twice a day, and issuing a certain number of 5-gallon (old paint) drums of water. During long periods of heavy rain the opportunity was taken to top up the two domestic tanks. The steel-plated Boat Deck (we had no wooden decks!) was thoroughly cleaned, and rain water was directed down into the domestic tanks through a hose attached to the bottom of the Boat Deck drainpipe, at Main Deck level. In those days fresh water wasn't chlorinated on board, and I don't remember drinking-water ever being boiled. Fresh water storage tanks were regularly cement-washed.

When "CLAN ANGUS" hove to in heavy weather for a prolonged period one heard stories about ships running out of coal and having to burn furniture to reach port. To ensure we never ran short of coal, the Chief Engineer kept a "bit up his sleeve". At sea, he and the Second Engineer regularly measured bunker spaces to check our remaining coal. Coal originating from two sources occasionally caused a spontaneous combustion fire. This would be well below the surface, and was extinguished with fire hoses, with the bilge pump running. Such fires were never a cause for serious concern. When bunkering to capacity, an amount of coal equal to the "up the sleeve" reserve, had to be stowed on deck for a few days. This would be against the forward bulkhead on port and starboard sides of the amidships house, usually covering the larger of two portholes of the Chief Engineer and Cadets cabins. Understandably, cadets suffered the longest! Our cabin had asbestos-covered steam pipes running through it, no forced

draught - just a small fan – making it unbearably hot, in and departing from, say, Aden, in mid-summer. Bunkering methods varied enormously. At Glasgow, railway trucks were raised, whole truck loads tipped down a shoot into the bunker saddleback and sidepocket, beside the cadets' cabin, always at night! At Aden, coal was loaded in baskets, passed up the ship's side on staging from barges, tipped into the bunker hatch, and trimmed into the wings, by hundreds of coolies. These coolies would steal anything. Cadets, whose job it was to lock away fire-nozzles and brass sounding caps and suchlike, were in trouble when afterwards things were found to be missing! At Visakhapatnam, coal was loaded by women carrying baskets on their heads, up one gangway and back down another. Coal received from barges or on-shore yards was always stacked cube-shaped beforehand to enable our engineers to check quantities. Typical of the USA, at Newport News, bunkering was quick and clean. Conveyor belts fed coal down into the hatch, shooting it everywhere, making manual trimming unnecessary.

Rat and cockroach infestation, in those days, was part and parcel of carrying general cargoes from India. In the UK, while holds were empty, Port Health fumigated holds and accommodation with cyanide. After one such fumigation, the stench from a dead rat(s) somewhere behind a bulkhead in the Chief Officer's office was unbearable for weeks. In the USA, chemicals in cups, attracting rats to drink, were strategically positioned so that rats couldn't return to and die in their hiding places. In spite of fumigations, we often had rats. For rats on deck and in the lifeboats, cadets set break-back traps. I think our record for one night was six rats in six traps. I can remember the Chief Officer saying he had considered giving us a shilling per rat tail, and, because of the number we caught and the amount it would have cost him, he was pleased he hadn't done so. I once saw two (or was it three?) rats climbing together up a vertical bulkhead ladder outside the officers galley. One morning we found a rat had bitten a hole through all three of the tarpaulins on a weather deck hatch. Cockroaches were a problem in the accommodation. To prevent them from getting into the officers' "supper box" on the Bridge, the box was often hung from the Chartroom deckhead.

Lascar crews of the "CLAN ANGUS" were from the hinterland of Chittagong in what on my first voyage in 1946 was Bengal, which, after Bengal divided in 1947, became East Pakistan, and is now Bangladesh. Khalasis (seamen) and agwalas (firemen) were mainly Muslims, and included Topasses who performed the more menial tasks for the crew, such as cleaning toilets and sweeping decks. Catering staff for Officers were Christians who were able to handle pork and deal with garbage. In 1947, after Bengal divided, Hindu-Muslim riots caused enormous worries for our Lascar crews and their families. Always after arriving at Calcutta, they having been away for anything up to a year or so, the crew was immediately paid off. Day and night shore gangs were employed until the next crew joined. These gangs cleaned and cement-washed the after peak (reserve) fresh water tank, and painted the crew accommodation above it. Cadets were put in charge of this more or less continuous operation, the junior cadet on night work. I remember the Chief Officer going ashore for the all-important task of selecting his new Serang (Bosun). He was obliged to see all Serangs looking for a job, before deciding. The new Serang chose the khalasis, many of whom would be relatives or friends from his village. On board, Muslims prayed morning and evening, often more frequently, always facing Mecca. At sea, in overcast weather, cadets were often asked the direction of Mecca and time of sunset. In fine weather they prayed and ate on deck. It was taboo for a European's shadow to pass over their food. At ports where we got mail from home, cadets often read letters for illiterate Lascars, particularly the lonely (outcaste) Topasses, who could barely contain their excitement. Their relatives at home got or paid somebody to write these letters, purposely in English. Lascars very much respected Officers, sometimes preferring to confide in one rather than a shipmate. They thought we knew everything about everything – for example, we might be handed a broken watch and asked not only what was wrong with it but also how much it would cost them to repair. Hindustani, the language common to all Lascars, in those days lacked descriptions for items of machinery and new inventions. I recall a lookout on the Bridge describing an aircraft as a "Steam Murgh" ("Steam Chicken"). A number of the crew spent a considerable amount of their spare time away from home making fine-mesh fishing nets, to take home to their family of fishermen. Lascars, like all seamen, looked for bargains abroad. I remember the Serangs - the wealthiest Lascars – in New York buying enormous quantities of secondhand 'natty' suits, and quadrupling their money a few weeks later in Durban, selling it to Zulus, on a Saturday afternoon, when the port was quiet. They dressed khalasis in two or three suits, a hat or two, and maybe an overcoat as well, and sent them out of one dock gate, to return by another gate, hoping not to raise Customs' suspicions. At that time Clan Line had a regular cargo service between the USA and South Africa, so such trading probably occurred on a monthly or so basis.

I look back on my time in the "CLAN ANGUS" as having been very rewarding and enjoyable. Deck officers gave me every conceivable job to do; Engineers made me conversant with everything in the engine room and to do with bunker coal; the Carpenter, a time-served shipwright, taught me numerous things which I found very useful throughout my career; and the Chief Steward – a butcher who joined the MN rather than HM Forces during WWII – I still think of whenever I cut meat, remembering to cut it across the grain, not with the grain. I experienced one small fire (other than in bunker coal), in our deck cargo, but I won't expound on that here. By the time I left the "CLAN ANGUS" I had made many good friends. I kept up with two officers always, but, sadly, the others I never saw again - they and I became "like ships that pass in the night"!

I left the "CLAN ANGUS" early in 1949 at the end of a twelve months' voyage. After a short leave, I joined the TSS "CLAN MACTAGGART", as Senior Cadet, for her maiden voyage, which completed my sea-time to sit my Second Mate's Certificate.

Richard Olden