

## THE DAY THE BOTTLE DID'NT BREAK.

On a chilly day in December 2007 many of the “great and the good” assembled at Waterloo Station to entrain to Southampton – and the naming of the new “Queen Victoria” by Camilla Parker Bowles, Duchess of Cornwall. After champagne and canapés in the Southampton docks terminal – where they were entertained by a carol-singing choir –the invited guests made their way to the viewing stands and the ceremony began. Speeches were made and finally the Duchess named the ship “Queen Victoria” – and pressed the button to release the customary bottle of champagne. The bottle carrier, mounted against the hull, gave off a solid “clunk” – but no champagne cascaded over the gleaming hull. Almost immediately a hand appeared, the bottle was broken, the Master called for “three cheers for the Duchess” and the naming party went off to lunch.

For some present the failure of the bottle to break on first impact was an omen of ill luck and, shortly afterwards, on the ship's second cruise from Southampton, when some passengers fell ill with noro- virus, the press was quick to attribute this modest misfortune to the “bad luck occasioned by the failure of the bottle to break during naming”. The fact that about 2% of the population of the United Kingdom was suffering from the same complaint was not allowed to spoil a good story!

Since the third millennium BC the launching of a ship has always been accompanied by a religious ritual. The ancient Greeks had the good sense to drink the wine themselves (and poured water over the ship during the blessing) but in medieval England some wine was drunk by the sponsor and the remainder poured over the ship. The wine was held in a "standing cup" made of precious metal and as this was thrown overboard after the ceremony an undignified scramble inevitably followed hot on the heels of the launch. This custom persisted until the 17th. century when, for economy reasons, the valuable cup was replaced by a rather less valuable bottle of wine which was broken on the bow of the ship and, until quite recently, this custom was observed throughout most shipbuilding countries.

Failure to break the bottle at the first attempt is still regarded by many seafarers as a sign of bad luck and, unfortunately, the current practice of "naming" a ship some time after the launch has meant that such failures are not uncommon. Years ago it was the commonplace for the senior Apprentice Shipwright to be given responsibility for ensuring that the bottle broke on impact. This meant that the neck of the bottle had to be weakened by making a series of shallow cuts with a sharp file or diamond cutter -deep enough to ensure that the bottle broke but not sufficiently deep to allow the wine to leak out. In a well known Belfast yard it was traditional to practice on full bottles of Guinness and it never ceased to amaze the management how many bottles it took before perfection was achieved! Today, for a naming ceremony the bottle is probably bought from a supermarket on the day of the ceremony and tied with ribbon minutes before the actual event. Thus -when it swings against the ship either the bottle survives the impact or the ribbon breaks and it falls into the water. Precisely that happened during a naming ceremony of a large cruising vessel in Southampton some years ago and some time later - when the launch party was enjoying lunch - members of her Third World crew carried out their own naming ceremony - and this time the bottle broke on impact. Good fortune was assured.

The actual launch of a vessel can be a dangerous and difficult task and there have been many accidents associated with the act of sending a ship into her natural habitat. The most commonplace launching method was the "stern first" slide down the inclined and well greased building slipway but in the USA the WW2 building programme often necessitated the "sideways launch". More recently, ships built in graving docks are simply floated out.

One of the worst disasters coincided with the launch of a warship - the cruiser HMS ALBION - by a Thames based shipyard in 1898. The yard was situated at Bow Creek and the narrowness of the river at this point precluded the normal "stern first" launch and so the builders reverted to the "sideways" system.

On June 21st. 1898 some 30,000 workers, relatives and friends assembled to watch the Duchess of York launch the ship and, despite police warnings many had assembled on a rickety slipway bridge next to another newbuilding. The Duchess named the ship "ALBION" and the heavy bottle of champagne swung against the hull - and bounced off. The bottle was hastily retrieved but again the same thing happened. Eventually after a third failure the Duchess pulled a cord and the huge ship moved at increasing speed towards the river. As she floated a huge tidal wave was created, this impacted on the frail slipway bridge and many men, women and children were flung into the water. The cheers of the crowd drowned their terrified screams and it took some ten minutes for anyone to realise the extent of the tragedy and some 38 people died before rescuers could get to them. The Duke and Duchess were totally unaware of the disaster and they embarked on their own boat to return down river. Few people were in any doubt that the repeated failure of the bottle to break was a major factor in contributing to the disaster and the newspapers made much of the "unlucky" tradition associated with the failure to break the bottle at the first attempt. As for "ALBION" herself she survived The Great War and was broken up in 1918.

