

More Dredgings from the fast-failing memory of Electrical Superintendent Eddie Hunter

The Dredger

We had a little chain-and-bucket dredger, the dv "Landguard" at Parkeston Quay. Her Master was Mr Sidney Davies, a very tall man affectionately known to the Engineering Superintendents as "Floating Sid." She had a crew of six, including an Engineer and a donkey/greaser. And the "Landguard" was a very hard-working little vessel operating between all our ports, including the Irish Sea and Channel Islands berths.

She was in collision once with the aircraft carrier, HMS "Ark Royal" off Portland Bill, I think, and poor Floating Sid, loudly protesting his innocence, was forced to appear before an Admiralty Court by the Royal Navy (Rotten lot, no sense of humour!) The experience of appearing before the court quite devastated old Floating Sid who was never quite the same man again. I can't remember the outcome, but judgement must have gone against the "Landguard" as Floating Sid practically foamed at the mouth thereafter any time the "Ark Royal" was mentioned.

Anyhow, back to the matter in hand. When she not in service, to save on all manner of costs, the "Landguard" tied up to mooring buoys in the river, with one of her crew on board as a watchman, to tend her oil lamps and her mooring ropes. The crew were ferried to and fro on the port work boat "Pinmill."

We had a succession of Marine Superintendents at Parkeston Quay, one of whom was a very pleasant but seemingly shy man, Captain John Bowman. I describe John as shy because he never seemed really at ease with the comradely banter that was the norm among the Engineering Superintendents who outnumbered him four to one. Perhaps the transition (and contrast) between command and the office environment does take considerable adjustment for some men.

Anyhow, being on his own in a department of one, the Marine Superintendent was permanently on call for maritime emergencies, except for his leave periods, when an Assistant Marine Superintendent from HQ deputised.



We Engineers always told John Bowman who was "on call," and, for his part, John religiously informed us where *he* could be contacted if he was going out for the evening. He often used to telephone the Duty Engineer if something unplanned came up to say that he was going out to where ever and give a contact telephone number. That must have been a galling routine - never being able to call his life his own. (Now that I remember, Peter Frost, the Superintendent Marine Engineer and I were always in that position too. Peter as Second Call and me permanently on call for electrical problems.)

Naturally, the one and only time the Marine Super forgot to inform the Duty Engineer (moi) that he would not be at home, disaster struck. There's a Law governing these things, but I can't remember what it's called.

You have heard about the legendary luck of the Irish - well, don't believe it. I had agreed to swap on-call weeks with one of the others, Henry Perry, I think. And that damned Law applies, doesn't it?

It was about 8 o'clock on Friday evening and outside the weather was cold, wet and very windy. José and I had settled in with good books - no walk tonight! The telephone rang.

"Hunter!" My telephone manner was always brisk. (A lot like Peter Frost's *bugger-off-I'm-busy* mode - the one Peter probably doesn't think 'e has.)

"Harwich Harbour has been on the blower. The dredger's broken adrift," I was told calmly by a man in our Port Control Office.

"Have you informed the Marine Superintendent?" I asked.

"He's not answering his telephone, Mr Hunter. Harwich Harbour says we should call out a tug. Shall I do that?"

Oh! Pause for quick assessment.

Question 1 - Is the watchman aboard?

Question 2 - Am I laying the Company open to a salvage claim?

Oh, bugger it, here goes . . .

"Call the tug," I said. (I'd infinitely prefer to be court-martialled for taking action rather than for inaction.) "I'll go out and see if I can round up some of the crew," I added, with no idea how I would get them out to the dredger through the raging storm.

"Who was on the telephone?" José asked.

"Port Control," I replied. "The Landguard has broken adrift in the river. I've got to go."

"What? And swim out to her?" Jose asked.

"Something like that. Don't wait up."

On my way to the old town of Harwich, I diverted to call at the Marine Superintendent's house, which was in darkness. But the die was cast anyway. Down in Harwich, I went on a dry pub crawl (well, dry if one ignored the wind-driven rain!) I found the "Landguard's" Engineer in "The Billy," two of her Deck Hands in "The British Flag" and another, the Bos'un, in the "Stingray." Of Floating Sid there was no sign, and the men thought he was away for the weekend. I did also encounter the Mate walking along Church Street, only he wasn't on his way either to or from the church.

The tug, the "Grey Something-or-other" (I've forgotten which) was alongside one of the Harwich wooden piers, preparing to go after the dredger, which was being blown towards Shotley, collecting several small storm-tossed yachts from their river moorings on the way.

"Jump aboard, lads! Hurry up, or shell fetch up in the shallows and we won't have the depth to reach her!" yelled the Tug's Mate, recognising the Landguard's men.

I thought for all of a tenth of a millisecond about going with them, but, what could I contribute to that war effort? And, besides, I had probably done enough damage for one night, landing the Company with a salvage claim. So, the last I saw of the "Landguard's" crew was the forlorn huddle of men on the rain-lashed, wind-swept stem of the "Grey Delta" (I've remembered) as she set off across the river.

Fortunately, the watchman was on board, fast asleep, in the seamen's cabin wrapped in two Icelandic sleeping bags and buried under a pile of heavy woollen blankets and the first he knew that anything was wrong was when he heard the clatter of boots on the steel deck as members of the crew jumped aboard from the stern of the tug. (The H.S.E. would have a blue fit today.)

So, anyhow, no salvage claim. But that was not quite the end of the matter - for weeks afterwards the Company's office was inundated with insurance claims from yacht owners as far up the coast as the Wash, and as far down as Tilbury. Er . . . did any of you Southampton boat owners put a claim in, by any chance?

And there you go - I can lay claim to being the only Electrical Engineer in the country who has ever had to deal with a drifting dredger . . . Unless any of you know differently, of course . . .

