

The Red Sea 1953

The small motor vessels of the Halal Shipping Company Ltd, of Aden, Arabia, served ports in the Red Sea, Southern Arabia and the Benadir coast and, in addition to Hadjis bound for or returning from the Holy Shrines of Mecca and Medina, or the Red Sea specialities, hides, coffee bags and tins of kerosene, frequently transported sheep, cattle and, even, camels.

Red Sea sheep however were not the cuddly, woolly-coated variety with which we are familiar in the UK, some of which were allegedly mistaken for WRNS in duffle coats by sailors in Scapa Flow and other lonely stations, but had short coats and made excellent curry.

Any laws relating to the carriage of live-stock by ship were perhaps only sketchily enforced in Aden and elsewhere round the Red Sea coasts more than half a century ago, but the carriage of camels, on the hoof and unsecured, in the holds of a 700 ton coaster cannot be recommended.

Walking along the deck meant a balancing act on the backs of sheep and, after the sheep had been discharged, the white paint on the deck-houses would be found to have been licked off up to a level that could be reached by the sheep's tongues.

At Aden, sheep came alongside in lighters, tightly packed together. A deck crane or swinging derrick lowered a cargo hook into the lighter, several "snotters", or lengths of manilla rope having an eye and thimble at each end, being attached to the hook. Labourers or "coolies", working under the ship's own "Coolie Tindal", stationed in the lighter, then unhooked the snotters, hitched one end around the hind-leg of a sheep and re-attached the other eye of the snotter to the cargo hook. When all the snotters had been utilised the order "heave-away" was given and, saay, a dozen bleating sheep were lifted into mid air, each by one back leg, swung over the ship's side and landed on deck or in the hold at high speed. This performance continued until all the sheep were on board.

The problem of how to devise a more humane and dignified method of loading sheep at bouys or an anchorage must have exercised the minds of some of Aden's more caring citizens and officials for, on arrival at that port on one occasion, we discovered that progress had reared its ugly head and the loading method had been modernised.

Now the ship was provided with "sheep loaders", a heavy, cumbersome structure resembling in appearance a portable boxing ring. Corner posts were fitted to the heavy wooden base, connected on all four sides by wooden slats placed a few inches apart so as to form a wooden fence around the base. On one side a wooden gate had been fitted. One leg of a four-legged bridle could be hooked to each corner post, the common ring for the bridle then being slipped over the derrick hook, and the complete loader lifted from the lighter. Ideal.

Perhaps the reader has already grasped the idea:- the gate would be opened by a Coolie in the lighter, through which the sheep would be invited to enter the loader, forming themselves into orderly lines. With the contraption full the gate would be closed, the order given to heave away, and the loader would rise gently, cross the ship's side, and be carefully landed on board where, once the gate was opened by a courteous Coolie, the sheep would file out in an orderly fashion similar to London office wallahs being disgorged from a lift at lunch time.

Regrettably, as with most new systems, a few technical hitches soon became apparent. There had been no change in the method of stowing sheep in the lighters lying alongside the ship so, as usual, they stood tightly packed together. The first problem was how to land the heavy "boxing ring" in the lighter when the only available space was on top of the sheep. Accordingly, the loader was loaded over the ship's side by the Arab winch driver at the customary high speed, landing heavily on top of a considerable number of sheep. With the loader in this position the gate was of no value, the result being that the Coolies decided to load the pen by lifting the nearest sheep and hurling it into the middle. When the loader was seen to be heaped with sheep, some standing, some on their backs, others on their sides, the order to heave-away was given. As it was hoisted, the heavy loader often struck the coaming of the lighter and, late, the ship's side plating, causing severe injuries to any sheep whose leg protrude through the wooden slats forming the side of the loader. More injuries of this nature occurred when the pen was landed clumsily in the hold or on deck, after which the sheep were roughly physically ejected from the loader by the genuinely uncaring Coolies.

Both systems were cruel and I like to think that by now a better system has been devised. I wonder?

Incidentally, Masters of Halal coasters, in view of their responsibilities, had certain financial inducements. One was "Sheep money", with cargoes of livestock. In the 1930's the Captain would receive one rupee for each sheep landed alive and sound at the port of destination. They were also "considered" for payment of one half per-cent commission on the profits of the voyage "but in no circumstances should this be written into the Contract of employment".

Hamish Roberts



El Hak, working lighters at anchor, and, below, her details.

NAME: *M.S. EL HAK*
FLAG: *BRITISH*
OWNERS: *HALAL SHIPPING CO LTD LONDON*
MNGRS:
BUILT: *1929*
BUILDERS: *HAWTHORN LESLIE & CO LTD NEWCASTLE*
TONNAGE: *1022 GRT 511 NRT 1070 DWT*
SPEED: *11 KNOTS*
P of R: *LONDON*
REMARKS:
"The little jewel of the Red Sea"