

The salvage of the S.S. Great Britain The Voyage Home

Part two of Roy Martin's pared down version of Chapter 8 of his and Lyle Craigie-Halketts' book, Risdon Beazley: Marine Salvor. The complete chapter is on our web site at <http://www.cachalots.org.uk/cachalots-deck/the-cachalot/salvage-of-the-s-s-great-britain/>

I doubt if any one present in Port Stanley will forget that special moment when the *Great Britain* returned to Port Stanley; with all the cars (or rather Land Rovers) blowing their horns and the bells from St Mary's and the much bigger Christ Church Cathedral ringing us in.

However, we could hardly manoeuvre at all and spent several hours getting no closer to the jetty. All we could do was drop anchor in the middle of the harbour, as the wind had increased to gale force again. It was a scary night, we dragged anchor and Hans was unable to do much with the main engine as we were yawing through 180 degrees; we were all very pleased to see daylight. The wind decreased and we weighed anchor, attached the *Lively* and the *Clio* to the fore end of the pontoon and put the *Malvinas* alongside the port side

Then, terribly slowly due to our restricted steering, we edged alongside the Falkland Islands Co. jetty. Had we not had this short lull in the weather we might well have had to head out to Port William until weather conditions improved. Over the next ten days the *Great Britain* was firmly secured to the pontoon. We had to take on several welders from Port Stanley and labourers to clear loose scale and debris, driving wedges between the hull and chocks and help us move most of the dolphins again to better positions for bracing.

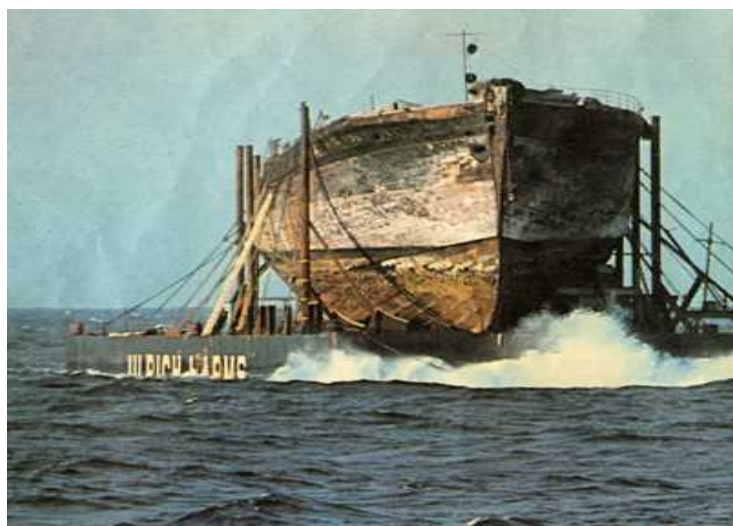
We were not very popular with the project management team because we cut fairly large holes through the shell plate at the upper tween deck and weather deck levels to pass heavy wires and chains round the stringers. Turnbuckles were used to fasten the chains and wires securely to the deck of the pontoon to help prevent any movement on the long trip home.

Nearing the end of the preparations the *Great Britain* management team organised a cocktail party in appreciation for all those who had assisted in salving the famous ship. The party was held in the bar of a local hotel, and was a great success. With great difficulty I managed to persuade my mother to attend. I noticed at the beginning of the evening she was trembling and on asking why, she admitted that it was the first time she had ever been in a pub!

We sailed on 24th April at about 0900 hours. A large gathering bade us farewell from the jetty and the faithful *Lively*, *Clio*, *Malvinas*, and the Royal Marines hovercraft escorted us, plus a flotilla of small private launches. The local air

services aircraft made some very spectacular passes over us as their final tribute. In spite of the success of the job, it was a very emotional time for the locals, as a slice of history was shortly to disappear from the Islands forever. For me the strange feeling of elation of a good job, and that I was on my way back to Southampton to my wife and son, was mixed with sadness at leaving my birthplace, mother, childhood friends etc. I doubted if I would ever return. *Lyle and Roy Martin did return some years later to clean up the South Georgian whaling stations.*

We cleared the Cape Pembroke Lighthouse about midday, and the tow was paid out. The sight of the great ship wallowing slowly in the South Atlantic swell was unforgettable; at times the pontoon was scarcely visible, making the *Great Britain* look as if she was going it alone.



Great Britain under tow. Photo Lyle Craigie-Halkett

We all agreed that the old lady really wanted to get back to her birthplace, during the whole of the operation we were constantly amazed that most things turned out for the best. After four days the gale died away, leaving a fairly heavy swell, but a calm sea. We took this chance to check on the pontoon and its load; some way was taken off the *Varius 2* and the tow wires adjusted a little.



Moving from Sparrow Cove to Port Stanley Lyle Craigie-Halkett

Three of us, with a German coxswain, took the small steelwork boat

and hung on fiercely as it was launched through the trawler's stern ramp. After clambering on to the pontoon we checked all the lashings, braces etc and found every thing to be in perfect shape. Nothing had moved, though a few more tons of mussels and rust had fallen down and was starting to smell quite foul. After being accustomed to the throb of engines, it was very strange and peaceful.

We were convinced that there was no reason why the long tow back to England would be anything other than a normal. Returning to the *Varius 2* we realised it was perhaps a bit foolish to have used this method of launch and recovery in the open sea. As we approached the stern we could see the rudder at times, and the wash from the propeller was not helping. The bottom of the ramp was lifting five to six feet above the surface. With much shouting, we attached a hook over the bow gunwale, and then waited until the stern dropped in a trough. The winch driver had to heave full speed and pull us up the ramp to safety, this was followed by a stiff drop of rum.

We reached Montevideo on 2nd May 1970. The average speed for the trip was just over five knots, indeed much faster than the trip down to the Falklands. The following two days were spent with further cleaning, lashing, and bracings. We also put in a few more cradles to help support the hull for the other 7,000 miles or so to go.

On the 6th the convoy left Montevideo for the final and longest leg home. The Risdon Beazley salvage team returned to the U.K. to work on other projects. Historians had calculated that on her last and fateful trip to the Falklands, the *Great Britain* had averaged 4.5 knots, but on her return piggyback journey the average speed was 5.3 knots.

The tow was mostly uneventful until the 1st of June: approaching the Cape Verde Islands stormy conditions slowed them to almost no headway at all, but no damage was done. The 14th July saw them making good speed again, passing Madeira. On the 18th they were abeam of Cape Finisterre. Shortly afterwards an RAF Nimrod with a press photographer on board took dramatic photographs, which appeared in a newspaper with the headline "Grandmother of them all".

The Project Management team had a very difficult time with various authorities in respect of bringing this type of vessel into the United Kingdom on a pontoon, at one time it looked as if Bristol might not accept her. Additional insurance was required to cover the un-docking at Avonmouth and for the tow up the Avon to Bristol.

One thing that concerned the Risdon Beazley team was the seemingly silly attitude of the immigration authorities when they heard that there was a Falkland Island seaman on the *Varius 2*. Kenny Thompson was to leave the trawler on arrival to work on the Beazley salvage vessels. As Kenny was born in the Falklands, he required a work permit if he was to remain in England. As that had not been applied for, and he was on a German ship, he was refused entry. Kenny had family living in Oban, Scotland and his grandparents were born in the United Kingdom. I am not sure who came up with the ludicrous solution, (*me, Roy Martin*) but as the convoy neared the pilot station the work boat from the *Varius 2* had to take Kenny, complete with his kitbag, and put him on the pontoon. He then had to climb on to the *Great Britain*



Great Britain's salvage crew

and thus he was allowed entry to England, as a British seaman on a British ship. It took several months before Kenny Thompson managed to see the funny side of being the first able seaman on Brunel's famous ship since 1886, and it's last ever crew member!

Captain Hertzog also had a problem. He was asked to slow down so that Jack Hayward, who had financed the project, would be able to take aerial photos of the convoy passing Lundy Island. This was not easy, with the *Great Britain* acting like a great sail in the following wind and with the strong Bristol Channel tides.

The small Beazley diving/survey vessel *Queen Mother* had met the *Varius 2* in the South West approaches. She carried equipment to prepare the *Great Britain* for her last trip on her own bottom. The ship had been launched by the Queen Mother for the Bristol Channel pilots. One of the sale conditions was that the name would not be changed.

The convoy arrived at Avonmouth during the morning of 23rd June 1970. The tow was released and a local tug, the *Sea Challenge*, brought the pontoon and its load into dock. As we entered the Royal Edward Dock, the *Great Britain* was welcomed back by all the ships in dock sounding their horns. For the couple of minutes the noise increased until it was just about deafening. The docks were closed to sightseers, but every vantage point was packed with press photographers, reporters and the public.

The *Mulus 3* was put in a lay by berth as a ship was currently occupying the graving dock. We had quite a lot of work to do preparing for floating her off the pontoon. The major job was to cement over the patch covering the split in the starboard side. Bill O'Neil ordered a lorry load of quick setting cement, which we had to hand carry across a gangway and then down almost vertical ladders to the bottom of the ship. We then had to go like fury as the cement was setting so quickly. On completion there was more than half the load of cement in the lorry, when we told the driver we didn't require any more, he said we had to have it all as he had no place to take it, and it must not be allowed to set in his lorry. After a few heated exchanges he tipped the lot on the quayside and sped off. Next day a couple of workers with jack hammers took several hours to remove the now solid mound. On July 1st all the loose equipment, such as the masts, were removed from the pontoon. Another steel plate had to be welded over the split at the insistence of the people responsible for the tow to her final destination in Bristol.

Horst Kaulen flew from Hamburg to oversee the floatation. We had quite a fright during the operation; a sticky valve in the *Mulus* trapped air and she suddenly took a starboard list, causing the *Great Britain* to rear over. Meanwhile the trapped air was rushing out from the port side bottom valves. The press photographers just about caused a stampede on the dock edge, trying to get a good shot of the air escaping, but as soon as the compressor was stopped so did the escaping air. I dived and managed to free the faulty valve. After a few hours the *Great Britain* was safely afloat without assistance, except for occasional pumping to keep her totally dry inside.

Two of us split the night between us by keeping a close watch on the ship, keeping a keen lookout for new leaks. But I am proud to say that she was reasonably sound; the small trickle of water seeping in was no more than on many ships I have worked on. Additional portable pumps had been placed throughout the lower hold, and our big salvage pumps were primed and ready for any eventuality.

A platform was erected with scaffolding from side to side to act as a bridge so that the pilot would be able to keep a good watch on the tugs and bends in the river. Once again the weather took a hand in the schedule, and in spite of the riverbanks being lined with photographers and sightseers alike, the tow up the Avon had to be postponed due to the wind gusting force five to six. It was a great disappointment to the many people who had travelled a long way to see the *Great Britain* being towed to her final resting-place. British Rail had organised a special train from London that was to stop at the Avon Gorge as the ship went past. Whether they had time to cancel the bookings I never heard.

Though our main concern was to watch for any sudden inrushes of water, we took furtive glances of the world outside; we could not believe the great numbers of people everywhere. Many people had slept in their cars overnight in order to see the spectacle and it was later estimated that 100,000 people turned out to watch the tow to Bristol. It was quite an emotional trip, especially passing underneath the Clifton Suspension Bridge, another of Brunel's masterpieces.



At Bristol we berthed in Y Dock to await the next suitable spring tides, which were about two weeks away, to make sure that the *Great Britain* could pass over the sill into the dock that she was built in. We trimmed her by the head using a rubber water filled bladder, giving a weight of about fifty tons to bring the stern up.

Prior to the tow from Avonmouth through the river Avon on Saturday July 4th Bill O'Neil had been told by the Southampton office to ensure that all the team were suitably attired in clean coveralls. Bill gave £20 to a person closely associated with the team (although now deceased and should remain nameless), to buy him a white coverall. After several hours the person reappeared, obviously having had a very liquid lunch, clutching a plastic carrier bag. He was assisted by a taxi driver, who demanded his fare. The following morning was still a bit windy, but the dock the great ship occupied was required that day for another vessel, so the decision was taken to proceed. Shortly after leaving the dock, Bill O'Neil put on his new white coverall and commented "Not too bad, but a bit short in the leg." However, on turning his back to us, everyone burst into laughter as 'Kellogg's Cornflakes' was emblazoned across the back, he kept his jacket on for the remainder of the day. We finally squeezed into the Great Western Dry Dock during the evening of the 19th July 1970. By chance it coincided with her being launched from the same dock on the 19th July 1843.

The Duke of Edinburgh visited the ship during the final docking. We were disappointed that he said little to Bill and gave us the impression that he thought that the Germans had salvaged Brunel's vessel. The Risdon Beazley involvement was now at an end, and, after the ship settled on the chocks, we gathered our equipment and returned to Southampton.

I would like to dedicate this as a tribute to Leslie James Collingwood O'Neil who sadly passed away some years ago.

For the BBC video see: Chronicle - The Great Iron Ship part 3.wmv, and parts 4, 5 and 6.

Roy Martin