

The Shantyman's Chorus

I was at two shipping dinners last week, although not, I should point out, on the same evening. On the Friday evening, members of the Southampton Master Mariners' Club (known as the Cachalots) and their guests crammed into Southampton Football Club for their fabled Sea Pie Supper, an important element of the maritime calendar in these parts.

Our new Club Captain was installed - Captain Jeremy Smart of the Maritime & Coastguard Agency, who might be described as the "chief enforcer" and the terror of maritime malefactors who stray into these waters. We listened to his boss Vice Admiral Sir Alan Massey, giving a very upbeat speech about the agency and why it punches so far above its weight in the world of maritime administrations, which it undoubtedly does. He also emphasised the credentials of the MCA as a friend of dogs, with the Coastguard teams rescuing literally hundreds of these furry friends from cliffs and quick sands around our coasts and reuniting them with their grateful owners.

Then it was on to the sea shanties, which is always one of my favourite parts of the evening. "Spanish Ladies" invariably brings a lump to my throat as I try and "rant and roar like true British sailors", but somehow fail, when I think how relatively few of these people there are, these days. But it is not an occasion for such maudlin thoughts, with 500 of us being - "jolly to drown melancholy"- as the shanty so crisply advises.

The previous Monday I had attended the annual dinner of the UK Chamber of Shipping, where nobody, at least officially, sings, but is a large gathering of the maritime good and great. This too was an upbeat affair, despite all the uncertainties brought about by both political and hydrocarbonical volatility and the consequences of the traditional over-optimism of ship owners. There are other traditions alive and well here, with the shipping minister telling everyone how brilliantly the government is doing in supporting shipping with its "maritime growth study" and the President telling the shipping minister that more oil is needed to lubricate the wheels of industry. It is the formulae, most years.

The President, Marcus Bowman nevertheless managed to enthuse about the "massive opportunities that exist in global shipping", but suggested that there really was more room for Brits to get out and grasp a few more of these. More entrepreneurs from the UK, recommended Mr Bowman, should cast their bread upon the waters, in the way they once did, in the anticipation that it would return, buttered on both sides.

You might agree with the President, that it would be great to see something of a maritime renaissance in a land where there was once such an affinity with the sea. But you only have to ask yourself why there are not more marine adventurers, and the answer immediately pops up, in the precarious finances of so many of those presently involved.

Your streetwise UK entrepreneurs are arguably too clever and well informed to take a punt in shipping, if you consider this is primarily about marine transport, rather than merely speculating in ships with borrowed money. They can see the endemic overcapacity in most sectors and discern the very real reluctance among those who use ships to pay a reasonable rate for their employment. They see ship operators racing around the world, seeking the cheapest possible labour to man their hugely complex ships, the everlasting squeeze on costs and the attitude of shippers, who think all their birthdays have come at once as they torture those operating the tonnage they employ.

Chamber of Shipping presidents are required to demonstrate a certain optimism, but I would suggest that a lot of water must pass under the bridge before we see the sort of maritime bravado that was prevalent in Victorian times, when shipping was a genuinely rewarding business. It would be interesting to see what would happen in the TV show "Dragon's Den" if some bold person racked up to ask for a substantial sum for a share in a ship! A fast retreat down the elevator, I would suggest.

There is, said the President, "a global shortage of seafarers" with an obvious need for "a new seafaring generation", which offers a link between my two dinners; seafarers of every generation being present at the event in Southampton. Mr Bowman is absolutely right, but as long as the rewards in the industry remain squeezed, the real demand is for cheap, rather than UK seafarers.

We can still find people interested in the maritime industry, even a sea career, where there is enormous technical challenge and genuine interest in essential and socially important work. But we still have well trained and educated cadets struggling to find a permanent position once qualified, a shortage of training places aboard ship and an insufficient number of employers willing to pay the going rate for a British seafarer, when cheap and cheerful foreign crews can be employed, on British ships, under the red ensign. If we are to produce genuine maritime "growth" with employment for a new generation, who may just possibly number an entrepreneur or two among them, we have to square this circle. Otherwise, we will all "rant and roar" in vain.

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Lloyd's List ,Viewpoint, 16 February 15