

Very First Trip

I grew up in the West Somerset coastal town of Minehead from whose small harbour a busy coasting trade had existed from mediaeval times right up until the First World War. As a schoolboy, I spent a lot of time down at the harbour watching the small fishing and pleasure boats plying their trade, fishing from its granite wall and messing about in boats myself when I learnt how to handle them.

My chief interest though lay in a sturdy black hulled wooden ketch, the last survivor of that local coasting trade. The vessel was engaged on long term contract to supply coal to the town gasworks from Lydney in Gloucestershire. In spite of years of carrying such a filthy cargo she was kept clean and smart with white painted wheelhouse and deck fittings, varnished spars and gunwales. She also had a scrolled stem head under the bowsprit in the form of a Union flag which was kept carefully painted in red, white and blue.

The owner and master occasionally took reliable able bodied friends along for a trip on condition that they worked their passage. He also very occasionally took local boys for a trip provided that they were obedient, willing to learn, not afraid of hard work and had their parents' permission. I had let it be known in the right quarters that I had all these virtues and just hoped that the permission bit would follow if and when the time came. It so happened that I was in the same class at school as the master's nephew, and so took care to stay on friendly terms with him.

His family lived near the harbour and we messed about in boats, fished, and worked the same vegetable plot together in the school gardening club. One morning in Spring 1948 he casually asked me if I would like to go for a trip with him during the coming Easter holiday. His father would be sailing for the trip as acting mate and would keep an eye on us. Heaven! All thought of school work vanished until I could get home that afternoon and coax the necessary permission from my reluctant but resigned parents. I had little inkling of what I was in for.

The ketch was the "Emma Louise" of 72 nett tons, a length of 75 feet and a beam of 19 feet. She had been built by a well known shipbuilder at Barnstaple, North Devon in 1881, and in the first part of her career had carried cargoes between West Country ports, Ireland and the South Coast entirely under sail. In 1926 she had been bought by a local seafaring family and brought to Minehead to be employed in the Bristol Channel trade. Even at that date, sailing coasters were fighting a losing battle with road transport and the railway, so before the Second World War the vessel was fitted with an auxiliary engine to assist her entering and leaving port and in the strong Channel tides. When I sailed on her she was 67 years old and nearing the end of a long hard life.

I climbed down one of the slippery harbour facing piles to her deck on a grey morning about 0700, aged 13 and clutching the food I had been told to bring for the trip. A loaf of bread, a cabbage, 3lb of onions and a half pound of butter. All the fresh food was stowed carefully away in the jolly boat resting on the single hatch, the coolest and cleanest place on board I later learnt.

We boys were told to sweep up the few remaining pieces of coal left lying around the deck after the last discharge, put them in a bag and take them down into the foc'sle where the master had already lit the fire in the stove.

Meanwhile the engine was started by the mate – no easy matter as I had often observed from the quay. It was a single cylinder semi-diesel engine of 1920's vintage which was heated with a fearsome paraffin burner directed at the cylinder head. When the mate judged the cylinder to be hot enough, diesel oil was let in which caused an explosion and smoke to pour from the exhaust pipe leading aft above the wheelhouse. After this alarming treatment the engine usually started and settled down to its familiar tonka-tonka beat. Sometimes it refused to start and the process had to be repeated until it did. For this reason, once started the engine was never turned off when under way as it was too



The photograph shows the "Emma Louise" alongside in Minehead harbour with her sails up to dry before loading pit props seen on the quay beside her, and was taken in 1932. This is before her conversion to an auxiliary sailer and so she still carries a jib boom, topmast and full suit of sails. The steam crane is alongside her, and must have been nearly as old as the ship.

Photograph reproduced by courtesy of John Gilman, author of 'Exmoor's Maritime Heritage' published by Exmoor Books 1999, who was another old school friend of mine.

dangerous for a man to climb down into the engine room and stand in a cramped space next to a swaying near red hot engine. Any engineers reading this will understand the workings of such an engine better than me, for at that age I was not very interested in mechanicals and so cannot give a more technical description.

One of the local boatmen appeared on the quay above to cast off our mooring ropes and we pulled them in under the eye of the mate. The engine was put into reverse and we slowly moved astern out of the harbour as there was no room for the ship to turn inside it. Once clear of the harbour we motored down Channel for about two miles and dropped anchor in deep water to wait for the tide, turning off the engine.

Sailing craft had to make use of the strong Bristol Channel tides even when motor assisted, in order to make the best progress and arrive at the next port when there was enough water to enter. At Minehead the tide goes out about three quarters of a mile at Low Water Springs and the harbour, situated at one end of the bay, is dried out by some 300 yards at Mean Low Water. With a mean tide height of 23 feet, this leaves a period of about two hours each side of high water for a loaded ship to enter or leave safely.

I spent the time at anchor stowing my few belongings in a locker in the foc'sle and getting to know the ship's gear and learning their names under the tutelage of the mate, who said he and his brother the master, only wanted to hear the proper names used by us boys. My friend had sailed on the ship two or three times before but could not remember all the nautical terms so had to learn them again. About an hour before low water the engine was restarted and we boys were shown how to heave in the anchor using the standard hand windlass as fitted to all coastal sailing craft. Two iron bars were inserted into a crosshead and pumped up and down, when by means of rods and pawls the windlass barrel would slowly turn and the anchor chain be hauled in.

We took turns pumping one lever while the mate worked the other and after about 20 minutes of this exhausting work the anchor was aweigh. When clear of the water, a small tackle was hooked on to the anchor and heaved up to the cathead where it was secured and held by a single iron pin. This pin could then be knocked out with a hammer when anchoring and the anchor would fall straight down and clear of the forefoot. The master meanwhile had put the engine ahead and set course to keep the distant island of Steep Holm fine to port. We were heading up Channel and our trip proper had started.

As there were no other craft about, one of us boys was left on the wheel with instructions to steer for a distant landmark while the two men hoisted the sails. The mizzen, staysail and jib were hoisted by hand, while the mainsail needed the assistance of a small diesel donkey engine with a drum end. The main gaff with sail was too heavy to hoist with her reduced crew of just two in the summer months, bearing in mind that there was a helmsman needed the whole time. I went up into the bows and looked over the bulwarks to see the forefoot ploughing steadily through the greenish brown Bristol Channel water, listened to the creaking timbers and the urgent thrumming of the sails. Although it was a cloudy day there was only a light breeze, not enough to make the empty ship lean or dance about very much.

We helped to cook the mid-day meal on the coal fired foc'sle stove, sausages and onions fried together in a large cast iron pan with bread, butter and tea. We were told that fried onions on their own were very good if one felt unwell, and that if we felt at all seasick to just eat fried onions and bread, but fortunately neither of us did!! We were shown how to keep the stove alight by feeding small amounts of coal and cleaning out the ash regularly into a bucket. How to hold onto the ladder after descending into a pitching foc'sle otherwise you could be thrown against the stove behind you, whose top sometimes glowed red hot when cooking.

Several half hour tricks at the wheel were also undertaken and we helped to lower the sails about an hour before arrival at 1730. The Severn had narrowed considerably to a buoyed channel by then and the master wanted good all round visibility to avoid the various small craft congregating around the entrances to Lydney and Sharpness. Our line throwing to the Lydney lock men drove the master to near despair and I was able to note several new words to add to my nautical vocabulary, but the ship was eventually tied up alongside a coal hoist in the canal by early evening. We then had to hoist the jolly boat over the side, swing the main boom outboard and uncover the hatch ready for an early start loading in the morning.

An evening meal was cooked and eaten, stew if I remember rightly. We were all as hungry as horses. After washing up, my friend pestered his father to allow us to go off in the jolly boat for a row in the canal. With strict instructions not to lark about, look after the boat and to return before dark, off we rowed. On looking more closely around the small boat I realized that it also served as the ship's lifeboat as there were two floatation tanks, spare oars, a locker for dry stores and nestling in the stern bilge, a small wooden barrico holding fresh water. The ship must have been one of the last British merchant ships to carry her lifeboat water thus.

We could both handle small boats and spent a pleasant hour or so exploring the canal and the assorted craft in it. We also kept an eye open for duck or moorhen nests in order to take some eggs back with us to supplement the rations. None were found as it was probably too dirty for wildfowl to nest in that part of the canal.

Our berths on board were in the cramped foc'sle, reached by climbing down a short wooden ladder through a curved scuttle with a sliding hatch just forward of the mainmast. The foc'sle was triangular in shape but blunted in the bow by the chain locker bulkhead, just big enough to contain two hammocks, one on each side against the hull with storage lockers under which doubled as seats. In between the hammocks was a triangular mess table in gimbals which could be slid up to the deckhead to make a clear space when not required. Aft of the table was the stove with a cast iron flue

pipe going up through the deckhead, which was never allowed to go out during a trip and so provided welcome heating in cold weather. Two glass prisms let into the deckhead provided additional daylight and after dark there was an oil lamp.

In the stern, and reached by another ladder down from the wheelhouse was a cabin for the master and mate containing two bunks, lockers and a small desk. There was a skylight, but again only an oil lamp after dark. This cabin was next to the engine compartment and so was hot and noisy when under way with the crew seldom using it. The only electricity on the ship came from dry batteries used to power an old long wave wireless receiver which was kept on a shelf above the master's bunk. This was used solely, as far as I could see, to listen for football results and weather reports in that order! There was no radio transmitter of any kind on board, and looking back, I don't think the crew would have wanted one. The fact that the vessel used to pass just a few miles off Portishead Radio Station had no significance to their lives. They had eyes and ears. Why would they want to talk to anyone ashore?

By 0730 next morning a coal train had been shunted alongside of us under the hoist, so we had a quick breakfast and the master checked the coal in the wagons to make sure it was of the right quality for gas production. The first 10 ton wagon was hoisted up in the steel framework and the chute positioned poking well down over our hatch coaming. The wagon was tilted on a hydraulic platform until the coal fell out into the chute and slid in a cloud of dust down into the hold. Such treatment would soon have worn the ship's timbers so the hold had long been lined with sheets of steel plate. The ship would have originally been capable of carrying 100 tons of coal, but since the steel engine compartment had been inserted into the hold space, this had been reduced to 90 tons.

After the first wagon had been loaded, coal trimmers climbed down into the hold to shovel the coal into the wings. They then climbed out to allow the next wagon to be tipped in and so on until 9 wagons had been loaded and the ship was down to her marks. She was also covered in a layer of coal dust as were we all. A hose was passed down from the quay and the mate washed down the whole ship from stem to stern with fresh water, while we were given a broom and a mop and told not to let the scuppers become blocked with coal dust.

When the ship was clean again, the fresh water tank on deck which held about 50 gallons was filled by the same hose. A bunker hose was then passed aboard and the fuel tank was topped up with enough diesel to take us back to Minehead and return to Lydney, for fuel was easier and cheaper to obtain in the canal.

The jolly boat was hoisted back onto the hatch, the main boom swung in again and everything readied for sea. We were not going to depart until the following morning as the ship normally never sailed at night. In that event, with only two men in the crew, one would have been steering and the other acting as lookout the whole time, not to mention cooking and lighting and trimming the navigation lamps. Neither would have had any rest.

After a cooked tea of fried sausages, onions and potatoes we boys had intended to walk into the town of Lydney and have a look around, but the thought of a 3 mile round trip was too much after a busy day, so we sat on the hatch and were entertained by seafaring yarns as recollected by the master. A vessel that old had quite a history, and we were told fascinating tales of life aboard her both when under the master's ownership and before, as he had known the previous owner and had had her early history passed on to him.

It was an early departure the next morning in order to 'lock out' at high water and we cleared the lock entrance by 0700 and threaded our way down river with the other coasters, barges and tugs leaving the up river Severn ports. The sails were hoisted as soon as possible, and with motor, sails and an ebb tide we were probably making 10 knots. We were the only sailing vessel in sight and several other small craft steered close to us in order for skippers to exchange news, gossip and local football league positions. The "Emma Louise" was a familiar sight in the Severn estuary and her crew well respected as being among the last of a dying breed of seamen.

Once past Severn Beach on the Somerset side of the channel we felt the force of a stiff south westerly breeze and the ship heeled until the lee scuppers were awash, the freeboard in loaded condition being little more than 18 inches. The bows ploughed straight through the short Severn waves with little pitching and spray blew continuously across the deck. As it became dangerous to walk the length of the deck we boys were told to stay down in the foc'sle and make our own dinner.

My companion soon succumbed to the motion and the foc'sle smell and took to his hammock, while I did not feel like eating much either, particularly as I had to sometimes climb up the ladder and empty the bucket which had been placed strategically under him. To get away from the foc'sle smells I spent a fair part of the afternoon crouched on the top step of the ladder, where, sheltered by the scuttle I could observe the sea and the landmarks we were passing. Looking down the deck to the stern I could also see the faces of the crew peering through the spray covered wheelhouse windows, and if I ventured to step outside the scuttle and stand up on deck they would gesticulate to me to stay inside where I was sheltered from the weather.

We made good time on the homeward trip, the wind dropping as we arrived off Minehead just past low water, where we lowered the sails and anchored again to await the rising tide. The crew cooked a hot meal, which if I remember rightly consisted of corned beef and potato hash and yes, fried onions, telling us to eat it all up. This we did and washed it

down with plenty of hot tea, so that by the time we were due to heave in the anchor we both felt better and were able to take our turn on the windlass.

We motored into the harbour at about 1830 and this time our heaving lines up to the men on the quay must have been more acceptable, as they did not bring any more ribald comments from the master. We tied up beside the old corrugated iron clad steam crane, the ship's usual berth. My parents were waiting on the quay but I doubt if they recognized me at first in a fading light as I was several shades dirtier and wore an old cloth cap I had found in one of the lockers.

Before I could join them we had to help prepare the ship for unloading the next day, so the boom was swung out, the jolly boat dropped into the water again and the hatch uncovered. The master then had to go ashore and light a fire under the crane boiler so that there would be enough steam pressure in the morning when work was due to start, as he was also the crane driver. The crane would lower huge steel buckets down into the hold where they were filled by shovellers supplied by the nearby gasworks, raised and tipped into waiting lorries on the quay. Each bucket held about half a ton of coal and filling them was back breaking filthy work. When you looked down into the ship's hold during discharging, sometimes the only sign of life was the whites of the shoveller's eyes!

The "Emma Louise" continued sailing in this trade until 1953 when her triennial survey revealed that extensive repairs were necessary which would have been prohibitively expensive. My friend later told me that the surveyor's knife had sunk up to its hilt in her sternpost. She was therefore sailed on one last trip to Appledore in North Devon, near to where she had been built 72 years before, and broken up. Various pieces of her equipment were saved and sold to enthusiasts, including her carved stem head which I believe was acquired by Basil Greenhill, the then director of the National Maritime Museum.

I did not see her final departure, as by then I was away at sea as a cadet on voyages to Australia, but that trip I made on her was my real 'first trip', and life was never quite the same after it.

Terry Winsborough.

This article first appeared several years ago in "Shieldhall Matters" but has been amended in detail to pass the scrutiny of those members who may have served their time in sail!