

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

What have you touched, Second?

When I first went to Parkeston Quay, in October 1972, and the ss "Avalon" was still based there. Although a beautiful-looking little ship, with graceful conventional lines, she was not a roll-on / roll-off vessel, so she had been replaced on the Harwich / Hoek route by the much newer mv "St George" which was. The "Avalon" was used only for cruises, and she was very popular with a particular regular clientele. I mention her now because she will have a small supporting role in this tale and a starring part in two others.

There were also two early container vessels plying between Parkeston, Zeebrugger and Dunkirk. Sister ships, they were somewhat mundanely called mv "Sea Freightliner 1" and - what would you expect? No prizes.

The Freightliners worked opposite to each other, one arriving at about 18:00 unloading, loading and departing at 14:00 next day clearing the berth for the next 18:00 arrival.

In mid-December each year, the Shipping and Port Manager hosted a lavish Christmas luncheon attended by the Port's management team and a number of invited V.I.P. guests, such as the Mayor, the Heads of H.M. Customs, of Immigration, of Special Branch and all their deputies, the local Director and senior managers of DFDS, whose ships used our port facilities, Old Uncle Tom . . . you get the picture.

By the time the Shipping and Port Manager had "taken wine with" just about everybody present, well, no-one with even half a social conscience was driving home.

Then, in late January, when "the dust had settled" following the Christmas and New Year Festivities, the DFDS Local Director hosted a similar luncheon on one of their ships, mv "England," with much the same guest list. The affair began at about 11:00 and ended at about 16:00, with the guests taking care not to tip, for the obvious reason, as they descended the gangway just before the vessel sailed for Denmark.

Well, Peter Frost, Henry Perry, Mr Plews (a HQ Engineer on secondment) and yours truly, not one of us feeling any pain, nor the biting winter wind straight from Siberia, were walking four abreast, in comradely fashion back to the Hotel (our office building). It was just after 16:00, and "Sea Freightliner 11," which should have sailed two hours ago, was still propped against the wall! The four of us executed a smart left incline and marched purposefully, if somewhat unsteadily, towards her.

We were met at the head of the gangway by a cynically-amused Captain, his grinning Mates, an acutely embarrassed and worried Chief Engineer and his very harassed and distressed Second Engineer.

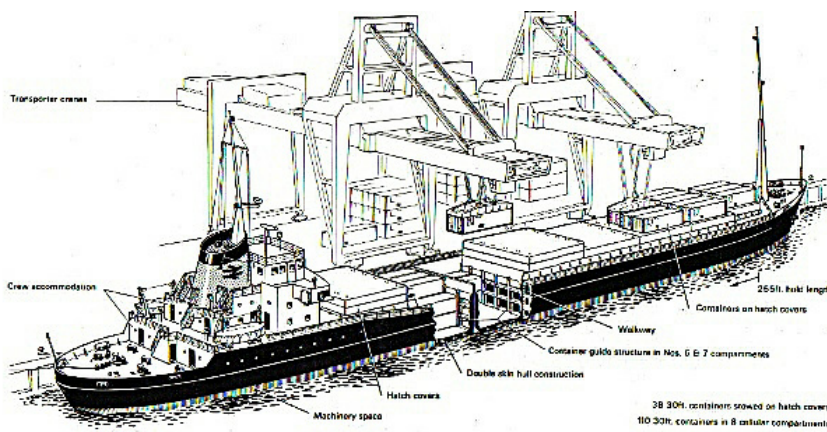
"She won't go, Mr Frost," said the Captain gleefully.

"What do you mean, she won't go?" Peter Frost demanded, exhaling a cloud of alcohol fumes.

"The main engines won't start," the Chief said glumly, freezing in his white boiler suit.

"What have you touched, Second?" Peter Frost demanded, blinking.

"Er, nothing, Mr Frost, honest," the Second protested. "They just refuse to start."



These 4000 ton cellular container ships, which could load 148 boxes, were the first to be built in Britain, at John Readheads, South Shields, in 1967/8. They were withdrawn from service in '86 and Sea Freightliner 2 was broken up at Gadani Beach in 1987.

"Must be some sort of control trouble," said the Chief, fixing me with a baleful stare, from which my befuddled mind concluded that the engine controls must clearly be in my bailiwick.

"Let's have a look," Peter decided, and lead the way below.

Although the Danish Aquavit that I had consumed, and to which I was not accustomed, was dulling my senses more and more with each passing moment, and I longed for nothing more than the release of oblivion, I struggled manfully to stand upright and think.

As the berthed ship pitched and rolled beneath my feet, I dimly decided not to follow the others down to the engineroom - the problem, I felt certain, was up on the bridge, so I followed the Captain and the Mates up there, ignoring their *where-the-hell-do-you-think-you're-going* stares. There were, I vaguely remembered from my one visit to her sister ship, engine control consoles on the port and starboard bridge wings and one about amidships in the wheelhouse. Ah, I had been right - she was fitted with bridge controls -and, on the top of each control console, was a large red emergency stop button.

"Anybody fiddle with these?" I asked the Captain, who was watching me sceptically. "Not that I know of," he answered, disdain sounding in every syllable.

"Excuse me, Sir," said the First Mate, "we did have that visit before lunch, from those school children from Mayflower Primary."

Ah ha, I thought, through the alcoholic haze that surrounded me. I pressed the emergency stop on the port bridge wing. It emitted a faint "click, clock" sound. I put my ear closer and pressed the button again. "Clock, click."

"Do you know what you're doing, young man?" the Captain asked, managing both insult and compliment in one sentence.

I was about to fire the question back at him, but fortunately alcohol doesn't make me querulous. But he was asking for it -I mean, it was *his* damned ship which was still tied to the wall more than two hours after she should have sailed. Giving him merely a mild look of scorn, I walked to the wheelhouse console and pressed the emergency stop.

"Clock, click." And again - "click, clock." Definitely an "ah ha!" But not quite "Eureka!" Not yet, anyhow, but my feeling was for "click, clock" as the Stop Position and "clock, click" as the Reset. So I pressed the wheelhouse button once more.

The starboard console button confirmed my intuition - it went "click, clock" followed by "clock, click."

I lifted the wheelhouse / engineroom intercom and pressed the call button.

The Old Man and all three Mates were looking at me, their faintly disapproving expressions betraying their collective opinion. I ignored them. At sea they and the ship's Engineers had command, but in Port, and particularly in circumstances like those prevailing at the time, the Superintendents were in charge.

"Chief Engineer speaking."

"They will start now, Chief," I told him, with the total conviction of the totally inebriated.

Seconds later, first the port and then the starboard engine rumbled into life.

"What happened? What did you do?" the Captain demanded, thereby placing himself in the same category as Senior Commercial Administrative Types in the uptake stakes.

Now, I know and admit that I should have answered, but, he had managed to get under my skin, so I ignored the question and turned instead to the Chief Officer.

"Mishter...*hic!*...Mister Mate," I said. "Next time you entertain school children on the bridge, do make sure the little buggers keep their hands in their pockets."