

## Fifty Years on Salt Water

Leslie (Charlie) Chapman was the son of a Norfolk farmer and he went to sea in the early 1900's. He served his entire four year apprenticeship in one trip on the *Brilliant*, which was then the largest sailing ship in the world and, together with her sister ship *Daylight*, was the largest four-masted barque ever built. He went on to serve with Union Castle and became a Trinity House Pilot with the I.O.W. District. In the between wars years he was choice Pilot for North German Lloyd and latterly for Shaw Savill. He must have retired sometime in the late 50's. Tom Effeny remembers him as Charlie and Tom started in the Pilotage service in 1955.

I have a copy of his memoirs which have been passed down through various interested members of the Southampton Pilot Service. They must have been written after Leslie retired and cover mainly his life at sea before he became a Pilot. There are few dates and names; perhaps he had forgotten many of them by then but it is all very interesting and exciting stuff. I don't know yet whether Leslie was a Cachalot but I would be surprised if he wasn't as most Pilots in those days were. The memoirs consist of 146 pages photocopied from originally typed ones. There are no chapters or natural breaks in the narrative so I will attempt to edit it into serial form as best I can. Should keep us going for at least five years! Here is a taster for you.



I must tell my story in my own way and I do not intend to trim my sails to please anyone.

"Light the binnacle, boy", an order that I do not suppose will ever be given again, as the days of the old square-rigged merchant sailing ships have gone for ever. In those days the compasses were made visible at night by two colza oil lamps, one on either side of the binnacle, and in a gale of wind they had the habit of going out at vary awkward times. Frequently an apprentice was told off to stand by in a gale to keep the lights burning. I was one of those apprentices who had to do it. I have been told, that the girls in Australia, to attract an apprentice's attention used to call out "Light the binnacle, boy". This I cannot vouch for, as sad to say, that is one of the few places in the world that I have not been to.

Anyway, I am a long way ahead of my story, so let me begin at the beginning.

I have been asked many times why, as a son of a farmer in a small village in Norfolk, miles away from the sea, how I came to take up a seafaring career. The only salt water or air in my blood came from a one day visit each year to Great Yarmouth. This was by means of a small steam boat called the "Kangaroo", practically the first one of its kind on the River Yare. The only other connection with boats and the water was a daily crossing of the river morning and evening in a row boat on my way to and from school in Norwich. With my brothers I had to walk three miles over marshland, and the same back in the evening, to take a train to Norwich, starting at seven in the morning and arriving home at seven in the evening. In the winter months each boy carried a lamp, with a candle in it to light the way. This leads me to answer why did I go to sea? One morning when I was about eleven years old, during assembly in school, the head master came into the class-room with a young fellow in a "Brass Bounders" uniform, who had once been a scholar at the school. The boy sitting next to me said "That is my brother, he is an apprentice in a sailing ship - that is what I am going to be. How about you, 'Country'?" - which was my nickname at school. I immediately said I would do the same thing, not having the slightest idea what I was letting myself in for. But let me say here and now after all I have been through during my fifty-two years at sea, I would do the same again. A sequel to the foregoing story is that my son decided to go to sea about forty years later, he had an interview with the Marine Superintendent of the Port Line, who was the boy I sat next to in school the day I decided to go to sea, and later on he actually sailed with the "Brass Bounder" that walked into the class-room; he was then the Commodore of the Port Line.

Time went on, but my idea of going to sea did not change. At the age of fourteen I left school, still having no idea as to how I was to achieve my ambition. Until one night my father came home from Norwich and said a Navy recruiting

officer would be cycling down from Norwich to interview me, to see if I was a likely recruit to join H.M.S. Ganges. Thank goodness he did not come - I expect he found the distance too great, otherwise without knowing I would have found myself as a sailor in the Royal Navy and not on sailing ships. A fortnight later my father came home and said "Pack your gear I have got a berth for you in a small coaster sailing out of Great Yarmouth, to see if you will actually like sea life". In due course I went to Yarmouth and joined the ketch "*Plover*" a vessel of one hundred and ten tons. The crew consisted of Captain, mate, ordinary seaman and boy, which of course was me. I soon discovered that I had to do the cooking and was immediately called the "Doctor" - by that name all coastal cooks are known.

I was soon taught the rudiments of the job, and became a dab hand at making "Spotted Dog", a pudding we had every day of the week. One other thing I remember is using my cap as an oven cloth, it became so saturated with grease, that I did not need a southwester in rainy weather. My bunk was used as a locker for sails and ropes, a bit uncomfortable at first, but I soon got used to the unevenness of it all and slept well at sea; as our watches consisted of four hours on duty and four hours off - which was very tiring for a young boy.

On my first voyage we sailed for Swansea with a cargo of scrap iron, this strained the vessel so much that we had to pump out several times during a watch. We reached Swansea in about ten days, as we had to shelter in Start Bay owing to some stormy weather. Anchoring off a small village called Hall Sands. Having discharged the scrap iron cargo, we moved under the coal tips and took in a cargo for a small port called Pentewen in Cornwall, this cargo took us less than an hour to load.

While waiting to sail, a large Norwegian barque moved across the dock to the coal tips, the crew hove her over by manning the capstans, I shall never forget the thrill I had on hearing the Capstan shanties being sung as they walked around heaving the ropes in. This was my first real touch with the life I was hoping to live.

After sailing, the *Plover* leaked so badly as the result of the iron cargo, we had to sail to Penarth, and went on the gridiron to have all the seams caulked and pitched. Naturally this eased our work considerably as we had no more pumping to do. It took us three days to reach Pentewen, a small harbour in which we were locked in. I recall one little episode while in dock. The children were coming home from the school and had to pass the *Plover*, as they were passing us I suddenly felt very important and to show off, bearing in mind that I was only fourteen, I decided to slide down the painter into the boat to bale it out, which incidently was as dry as a bone. A puff of wind shifted the boat and I landed in the dock, to the cheers of the youngsters and to make matters worse the mate of another ketch called out "*Plover* ahoy, your doctor is in the dock, why

ketch called out "*Plover* ahoy, your doctor is in the dock, why don't you pull him out". This was done to more cheering from the school kids - was my face red. It taught me a lesson never to show off again.

After discharging the cargo we washed all the coal dust out of the hold, and around the decks, then went outside the dock gate and waited for the tide to ebb, and leave us high and dry. A gang of men then shovelled about fifty tons of sand into the hold, to act as ballast. Having finished, we sailed on the tide for Great Yarmouth, calling at Cowes, Isle of Wight, on the way. Here the captain bought a boat load of second hand yacht ropes for rigging up our own ketch. Little did I think at the time that I would be a Trinity House Pilot for that district many years later. We arrived in Great Yarmouth at the height of the herring season, for we had a charter to take six cargoes of herrings to Bruges in Belgium. A renewal of a charter which the *Plover* had done for the last five seasons. Half the cargo was loaded in barrels, and the other half were loose and had been salted. On arrival at Ostend, two horses took us in tow through the canal to Bruges, towing with a rope fastened to the main-mast head so as to miss the bridges when they were swung open. After discharge the barrels were filled with water to act as ballast, as the vessel was so much lighter in the water; it was now only necessary to have one horse to tow us back to Ostend.

At the end of the season the *Plover* layed up for the winter and the crew paid off. My pay was very small, only five shillings a week, which I think I well earned.

The Captain was a kindly old man, and made allowances for the small faults I committed. I remember he had two bowler hats, one green with age was worn at sea, and the other was for shore going purposes, and it was my job to see that he had the right hat on when he went ashore. I only tripped up once, he came back rather angry. We certainly had not got much comfort onboard, we lived in a small place right forward. The galley was a box affair, just large enough to get into if you stooped down, and was bolted to the deck amidships. When we tacked ship, my first job was to unship the galley funnel before the boom did it.

After a few days at home in our quiet village, life seemed a bit dull, as the time I spent in the *Plover* had more than settled my mind that I liked the sea, and I intended to take it up as a career. I started making inquiries about an apprenticeship in sail, and finally wrote to the "Anglo American Oil Company". They offered to take me if I was prepared to go the America to join a ship, also stating that I might be away from home for a long time. I was, four years and four months to be exact.

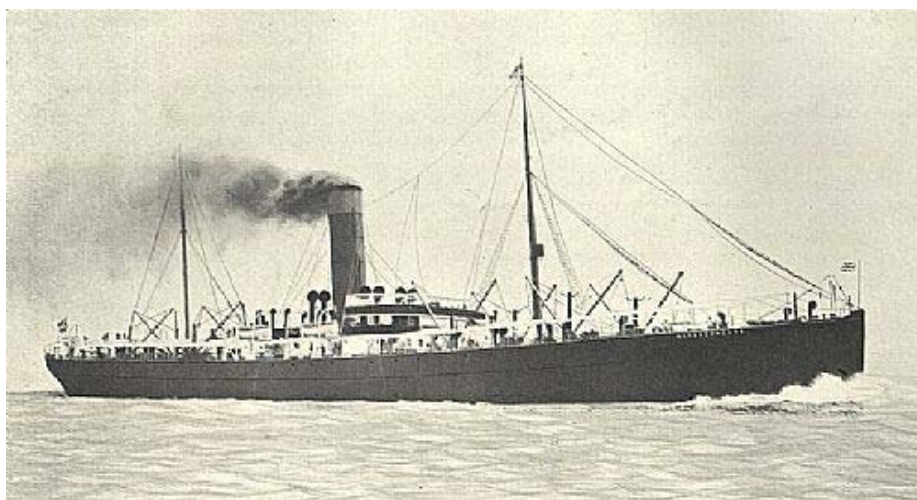
Naturally I accepted, then came days of preparation, getting indentures fixed up and the premium paid. I noted I was to receive four pounds for my first year's work, six for the second, eight for the third and twelve for the fourth. The present day apprentice gets more than that for one months pay. In those days it was no wonder some officers preferred to come up through the "hawse pipe" -an expression used when a man served his time before the mast - and got paid all the time while at sea.

I had to pass an eyesight test, so I went to the local doctor for a check up. I was asked to read the time on the village

clock, and passed with flying colours. I could have been colour blind like one apprentice I knew, he completed his apprenticeship and went to the Board of Trade for an eyesight test before sitting for his examination, and picked out dark brown every time he was told to pick out dark green. Four years of a young man's life wasted.

Having got my uniform, I tried it on and wanted to go to my old school and show it off like the other boy who had come into the class-room and set my mind on going to sea, but I never made it. The village carpenter made a sea chest for me, and after it was packed, I said goodbye to all the family. I cannot remember seeing any tears when I left home. One of my brothers left home for Canada about a year later, it was fifty three years before I saw him again.

I had orders to join the *s.s. Narragansett* in Newcastle, my father decided to go there with me. We arrived just in time to see the Captain, the Chief Officer and Chief Engineer going ashore for an evening out. The Captain told me to go on board, and invited my father to go with them. I heard later they intended drinking him under the table, but the table was turned, he brought all three back in a horse-drawn cab, and helped to put them into their bunks - never underestimate an old Norfolk farmer.



### **s.s. Narragansett**

**This was the vessel that took Leslie Chapman across the Atlantic to join his first ship as apprentice.**

**Built in 1903 for the Anglo-American Oil Co she was 9196 grt and 512 x 63 x 32 ft, then the largest oil tanker in the world.**

I was fortunate in having such a fine large vessel, for my first deep sea voyage. At the time the *Narragansett* was the largest oil tanker in the world, and except for war time building, was one of the last to be built with engines amidships. She was also a coal burner. She remained afloat till March 1917, when a submarine torpedoed her off the Scilly Isles, with the loss of all hands. Our voyage to New York took us fourteen days, as we struck some stormy weather during the crossing. There were three other apprentices besides myself, all joining the *Brilliant*. One newcomer like myself, and two who had served two years in the Barque *Lyndhurst*. I was nicknamed Dumpling right away as I came from Norfolk. That was the only name that I was called by the Captain and Officers alike during my time in the *Brilliant*. In fact, although sixty years have passed, I still get a Christmas card, using the same nickname. Two other apprentices were from London and one from Girvan in Ayrshire. Needless to say he was called Scotty all the time. I kept watch with the Chief Officer on the Voyage. What a difference to being at sea in the little *Plover*

in the little *Plover* whose length was about equal to the beam of the *Narragansett*.

On arrival in New York we were put on a train for Philadelphia, and eventually boarded the *Brilliant* at Point Breeze wharf. Incidentally four years later on completion of my apprenticeship I left the *Brilliant* at the very same wharf.

The *Brilliant* was the largest sailing ship in the world. Her tonnage was 3609 tons nett, and 3765 gross, having a length of 352 feet, and a beam of 52 feet. Height of her masts above the deck line was 180 feet, she carried thirty sails, which was equal to an area of half an acre. The main yard was one hundred and four feet long and weighed over seven tons. This gives some idea of the weight on a mast having six yards decreasing in size and weight as they went upwards, besides the weight of the mast which was in three pieces, the top gallant mast being made of wood, also the royal yard. To hold all this in place there were fifteen backstays on each side of the ship, of varying sizes, and four fore and aft stays to each mast. The *Brilliant* remained the largest British sailing ship, but in 1908 the Germans built the "*Prussian*" and "*Potosi*", which were larger. The *Brilliant* cost £54,000 to build in 1900.

We loaded one hundred and sixty five thousand cases of paraffin for Kobe - Japan, each case containing two cans holding five gallons of oil each. During the loading time, the apprentices were busy preparing the ship for sea. Doing such jobs as taking on board all stores for the voyage, food and otherwise. We soon learned the old trick of slipping a few tins of cabin stores into the half-deck – the name given to our quarters. These were hidden behind a chest of drawers, which was fastened to the bulkhead, the drawers were pulled out and put back again when the tins had been put away. This may sound dishonest, but it was always looked on as borrowing the stuff, and was a practice carried out in lots of sailing ships. They came in very handy later when the food became very monotonous, and I am sure the Captain and officers never missed them. We also took on board thirty tons of drinking water, to last a five months voyage for a crew of forty two. Naturally rain water had to be caught during the voyage to make sure we had enough to last us out.

This was kept in two tanks and was served out at four o'clock each day by the senior apprentice off watch.

When the loading was finished, we were towed to an anchorage off the Navy Yard, awaiting our crew. They turned up in the afternoon and as usual most of them were very much under the influence of drink. Trouble soon started, mostly fist fighting. Suddenly a marine superintendent rushed into the apprentices half-deck and dived under the table, and said, "There is some shooting forward". The senior apprentice bravely rushed out and rescued the Bosun who had been shot in the eye and back. (Six years later, I met the same superintendent, and casually asked him if he remembered the incident, he replied, "Of course I do, it was I who went forward and saved the Bosun". My memory was better than his). The Captain told me to hoist the ensign upside-down, apparently for assistance, this was spotted immediately by a navy launch, the boat came alongside and arrested the gunman, also the Red Indian who lent him the gun. Later the Indian was returned to us, no charge against him. - That was the only time in my long life at sea, that I ever saw an ensign upside down.

This crew was the most assorted one that I came across in the whole of my sea-faring career, we had seventeen nationalities amongst a crew of forty-two, including as already mentioned, the American Red Indian, our cook was a Chinaman, with a shaven head and a long pigtail, to me very intriguing, as I had not seen a chinaman before. We also had a minor Japanese Prince, as an apprentice in our half-deck. This was very handy, as on our arrival in Japan, we were entertained on quite a few occasions in one of the smaller palaces.

Before sailing the mates picked their watches, the first mate was a "Bluenose" Nova Scotian, a very tough man indeed, the second mate was an American, a very pleasant man and fortunately I was in his watch. He taught me a lot of sea-manship, which served me in good stead as years went by. Our captain was a Scot, a real gentleman one of the best sailors I have ever sailed with, needless to say he completely ignored us as first voyage apprentices.

*To be continued*

## **Brilliant**

**The four-masted barque in which  
'Dumpling' Chapman served his  
apprenticeship.**

**Built in 1901 for the Anglo-  
American Oil Co she was 3765 grt  
and 352 ft long.**

**Originally a case oil haulier she was  
suitable for conversion to carry oil  
in bulk and this was done in 1910.**

