

Gone Aloft

Captain Ken Owen passed away at home in the early hours of Thursday 31 October. Ken was a much liked and respected ship's master who had a career at sea which started as a Midshipman with Alfred Holt/Blue Funnel. He went on to serve for many years as captain of OCL, P&O Containers and P&O Nedlloyd container ships. After retiring from PONL, Ken was drawn back to sail with other companies and his last voyage was on the APL Denmark. After paying off that ship, Ken received an invite to attend a dinner at Banqueting House in London. He went down with his wife Allwyn, only to find that the reason for the invite was that he was to receive the Lloyd's List and Nautical Institute Shipmaster of the Year award for 2004, for exemplary professional conduct over a long maritime career.

Ken's love of the sea went back to the start of the Second World War when he was five years old. His family were on holiday in Switzerland when the conflict started, and they made a hurried return by train and ship to the UK. On the overnight sea voyage, he recollected lying next to a lifeboat and looking up at the stars on a completely blacked out ship, and thinking 'This is the life for me'. The obsession with a maritime career continued throughout his school days, leading him to sign indentures with Alfred Holt and Blue Funnel Line.



Talking to HRH Prince Philip at a function on board HMS Wellington in 2013.

Ken's career at sea through the 1950s and 1960s encompassed passenger and conventional cargo vessels. He secured the various qualifications through to 'Masters' (Certificate of Competency as a Master Mariner) and received promotion from midshipman to captain. By the 1970s he was sailing on the OCL Liverpool Bay-class container ships which were managed and manned by Ocean Fleets, and he moved over to P&O Containers the mid-1980s.

With P&O Containers and then P&O Nedlloyd, Ken sailed on a range of company container vessels, but it is fair to say that one of his favourite commands was the Strathconon, a ship he sailed on for a number of years on the TransPacific and Atlantic services. He had a reputation as a captain who was not only a good seaman, but who genuinely cared about the welfare of all on board.

Past Captain Ian Thomson was a good friend for over 70 years and says:

"I first met Ken when we were both midshipmen on the Blue Funnel ship Calchas in September 1954. Since then we have been close friends and I have many happy memories involving family exchange visits, holidays abroad, maritime dinners and company reunions. There is though probably only room here for three of those stories!"

When I was based at the port of Southampton and Ken was on the Peninsular Bay, I gave him a couple of grow bags so he could grow some tomatoes in the wheelhouse. This was one of Ken's favourite hobbies on board, and he told me that on one vessel an American pilot was amazed and said 'Gee Captain, I ain't seen tomatoes grown in a wheelhouse like this!'"

Apparently on another voyage, Ken's ship received a call from another company vessel that was passing, with a query about whether he was on board. When Ken came up to the bridge, the person on the other ship said he thought he must be on board as he could see the tomatoes through his binoculars...

Ken of course had a farm, and he didn't just bring his agricultural interests to sea with the growing of fruit and veg... In the accommodation on our vessels the internal doors would have notices about wearing hard hats, safety boots, etc. When Ken was on board the notices were usually about chickens, donkeys, sheep, pigs, etc.!"

When Ken's son Richard gave me the sad news on the morning of 31st October, I posted the information on the Facebook sites 'Blue Funnel for Old Timers' and 'OCL Bay Boats'. Within 24 hours there were more than a hundred responses from friends and shipmates of all ranks showing the enormous affection and respect they had for Ken. Sadly, I have lost a great friend."

Ken Owen joined the Club in June 1997 and was a regular attendee at the Sea Pie Suppers with other ex Blue Funnel shipmates.



With friends Michael Grey MBE and Captain Reg Keso MBE at the Sea Pie Supper in 2013

He lived in Derbyshire and wrote a regular 'Captain Ken' column for "Outlook", his local Parish magazine, and kindly gave permission for the articles to be reproduced here. I had already prepared his final piece before his death and you can read it on the following page.

Ken was taken ill earlier this year and was admitted to hospital in September. After a prolonged stay, his daughter Elizabeth and son Richard managed to get him home. He spent his final days there surrounded by his family, his dog and a stupendous view of the Peak District from his bed. This was all he wanted.

Our condolences go to his wife Allwyn and their family.

The tribute above is taken mainly from the PONLheritage.com website, for which thanks.