



SHIPMATES

Reardon Smith Seafarer's Newsletter

Issue No.39 June 2006.

Chairmen of the Reardon Smith Line

Sir Willie Reardon Smith 1935-1950



Douglas Smith 1950-1961



Sir William Reardon Smith 1905-1935



Alan John Reardon Smith 1961-1970



Charles Robert Chatterton 1970-1985

MEMORIES

The reunion at Ockbrook served to rekindle memories of the past going back over a lifetime with Reardon Smith. To meet again people one had not seen for perhaps 20 years or more was a privilege not the least to thank God we were still around to do so. Names to faces brought back a flood of long forgotten experiences and events. The intervening years had taken their toll - colour of hair or the total lack of it, extended waistlines, a few wrinkles here and there, slower movement etc. but all in all we don't appear to have fared too badly. Ofcourse we remember with respect and affection, many who have crossed the bar.

It was amusing to hear one rather formidable character (an engineer I assume) expounding his recollections over his ten years with the company. He was in full flood and the attentive audience hung on his every word. I thought if he had crammed so much into a mere decade, how much more others like myself had managed to accumulate over four decades or so. His was a 'short voyage' to those who had often been referred to as being with Smiths' – " boy and boy " !!

The cover photograph on a previous newsletter depicting Merthyr House, James Street, Cardiff plus the Editor's comments brought back memories of over 60 years ago, some of them strangely, more vividly than what I did last week.

The Editor tells me that this will be the first article from an " office wallah " – well, be that as it may, I seemed to have spent my working life with a foot in each camp – not a privilege enjoyed by many pen-pushers – I do feel an entitlement to add something to the long catalogue of other peoples memories. My involvement with many branches of the family and the insight into much of their private lives, will always remain a matter of trust and if any of our readers are looking for the odd bits of scandal , they may well be disappointed. However, one or two did not always practice what they preached.

To continue –

Christmas term 1940 having left grammar school with some papers to show I had not completely wasted my time at school and with no possible hope of continuing unpaid education, it was time to look for full time employment. My family background seemed to centre around ship repairing, drydocks, dredgers and the like, so it seemed natural to look to commercial life at Cardiff Docks. One had to start somewhere, and with little guidance I took the first job on offer with a Liverpool company who owned and operated a fleet of coasters inappropriately named the "Rose Boats" . Those I had need to board in the dock were floating rust buckets. I was not impressed – but where there's muck there's brass and they were good little money-earners. It was a 48-hour week and on my pay nothing short of slave labour. A bicycle was an essential part of the job as I seemed to spend so much time in the 'saddle' delivering letters within a mile radius of the office or scouring the back

streets of Tiger Bay locating replacement crew – firemen, greasers, donkeymen – all who seemed to emanate from the Yemen or Aden. It was an education in itself ! Bute Street and the adjoining nooks and crannies with all its colourful trappings seemed to have more boarding houses, doss houses, cafes and places of ill-repute than I ever imagined. I was not what one would term “ streetwise “ but I never ever felt threatened. It was a tremendous learning experience which enabled me to know the docks area like the back of my hand and in such a short time. After about six weeks I realized that I needed to look to more substantial companies and certainly ones whose standing in the docks were spoken of with an air of admiration.

I had seen many ‘trampers’ in the docks from time to time – heard stories about ‘Hungry Hogarth’, ‘Starvation Smiths’, Ropners, Seagers, Duncans, and numerous other shipping outfits.

A near neighbour who worked for coal exporters with offices on the first floor of Merthyr House suggested I write to Sir William Reardon Smith & Sons Ltd whose offices were on the second floor. I made a pre-application visit viewing the splendid scale ship models in the reception area. There was no contest between the ‘Rose boats’ and ‘Reardon Smith’.

My letter seeking employment brought an early response – either they were very efficient or I had tried the right place at the right time. My first interview was not too encouraging – there was some competition judging from the numbers coming and going. To my surprise, a second interview followed with what appeared to be a shortlist of three. I was told that if I had got the job I would know before I left the building and I assumed the others had been told the same.

One of the two interviewers was a gentleman named - Spencer Kemp – who many of the older RSL men will remember. Spencer had been severely handicapped from a child having been tipped out of his pram by a nanny whilst out walking, but despite his disability he led a very active life. A talented pianist and church organist his other love was soccer and Cardiff City AFC. At the City Ground – Ninian Park – on home matches, Spencer’s melodious tones could be heard over the public address system giving all the team news and announcements. He was also a qualified referee. At the time I was playing for Cardiff City Colts and Spencer had officiated at a number of games when I had played at the City Ground. Whether or not this had any influence on the proceedings I never knew, but before I left the office I was offered a job as a Junior Accounts Clerk at 12/6d per week, with hours more suited to my sporting activities – i.e. finishing at noon on Saturdays –and as an added bonus working with Spencer Kemp - That was indeed a bonus !! Start date – Monday 24th February 1941 and that is when it all began !! Little did I know that I had joined a ‘family’ and my future would be with them for practically the whole of my working life.

On entering the Accounts Department my first morning, I was struck by the combination of ancient and modern. Sloping wall desks, high stools for clerks to sit on with the central area a mixture of desks suitable for large journals. There were individual desks for those I thought must have been "seniors". The Chief Clerk/Accountant sat at the beginning of the first section of wall desks, perched on a high stool modified for a somewhat larger than usual rear end. A man in his fifties, sporting a starched collar of the winged variety and a cravat style tie. His sleeve ends were protected by push-on cuffs and reminded me of an emperor penguin. Very religious and said to be a pillar of the Cathedral, he would address you in short punctuated bursts as if to gather his breath for the next part of the sermon. His secretary, Ella Poole, would take letters leaning on the side of the wall desk because she had no where to sit.

Discipline was strict and enforced. Punctuality was next to godliness and each morning a rather formidable lady (Miss Shilson) of indeterminable age would stand in the General Office with a red pen in her hand waiting for the clock hand to reach the hour of 9 a.m. when she would draw a line across the attendance book page. If you were beneath the line - "YOU WERE LATE" - and a visit later in the day could be expected. Persistent latecomers were likely to be shown the exit door, never to return.

Everyone was addressed as either "Sir" - "Mr" or "Miss" - whilst in return your own surname carried no handle. Dress was businesslike. Females were not allowed to go without stockings (even in war time) but the younger girls used to fool the gentry by marking a seam line down the back of their legs. It was a no-smoking office but those males addicted to the habit used to disappear frequently (with the morning paper) to the 'gents' on the lower floor for a quick cigarette. Tea was provided morning and afternoon for which we paid a few pence a week, which was enthusiastically collected. The younger girls from the typing pool made the tea on a rota basis and the office boys collected and washed the cups. One office boy objecting to having to wash cups in a fit of temper launched two buckets full down the stone stairs. Sadly he followed close behind and broke his ankle . Management was very upset over the loss of the crockery.

Despite what would today be frowned upon, everything was considered the 'norm' and you had little option other than accept the house rules. Annual holidays could be taken after completing twelve months service and at the discretion of the departmental head. It was not in your interest to take time off unless you were really ill. It may sound like a concentration camp, but it was not. There was fun at both ends of the age gap and the younger element certainly knew how to enjoy themselves. I've no doubt the older ones knew likewise. There were a few romances - some survived the separation of war, others did not.

My year with Spencer Kemp passed quickly dealing with Accounts of Wages, Portage Accounts, paying off crews, signing on articles , allotments etc. The down side was the sad and difficult task of informing next-of-kin following the loss of a ship through enemy action. There was no easy way of breaking sad news to relatives and loved ones, but with help of Mission Padres, churches, and other agencies it was dealt with in the most compassionate and sympathetic manner possible. The "Santa Clara Valley" was the first loss I can remember but if my memory serves me rightly, thankfully there was a loss of only one life. 1941 as I recall, was a very bad year for the loss of ships and men and it brought home to us the dangers our men at sea faced daily.

Because of conscription the younger male staff were mainly "in transit" waiting for call-up whilst filling the gaps left by those ahead of them. Movement within departments meant that one had a good learning experience. I left Accounts to go into Customs & Excise where in due course I became Customs Clerk. Looking after our own and agency vessels with Customs, Board of Trade and foreign consuls made each day quite exciting. My time came to consider military service and Graham Hardy and I decided to go to the recruiting office one lunchtime and volunteer., - Graham for the Royal Navy and myself for the RAF . This meant an earlier call-up than would have otherwise been the case.

The Board at that time consisted of Sir William (2nd Bt.) his brother Douglas Smith (no 'Reardon' – he always said " Smith was b....y good enough for him) and the three son-in-laws of the first baronet – Arthur Popham (m.to Gertrude), Bill Liley (m.to Lily) and Douglas Low (m.to Betty(Elizabeth). The two grandsons Bill and Alan were Directors but serving in the army and whom I did not meet until after the War.

So we had the "Famous Five" – and indeed they were. The opulence they enjoyed placed them apart from the middle /working classes. Fine houses and estate, some with farms. Residences with extremely large well kept gardens, greenhouses and orchards.

Cooks, domestics, gardeners and cleaners were standard equipment – one or two had housekeepers and the odd butler and chauffeur. The success of the company mirrored their life style at a time when wealth and importance was measured by material possessions. Come to think about it, times have not changed all that much. Whether it brought them happiness was another matter but you can enjoy being miserable when you have money .

Despite the strict and often demanding regime they were a good company to work for and I felt some employees basked in the reputation of the family. "Reardon Smith" was a name respected not only locally and in the industry but globally.

In 1943 Graham Hardy and I left for military service. Graham went into submarines and I, after selective training, to Bomber Command before going overseas to Sierra Leone and Liberia with air/sea rescue units. In 1947 I returned to the UK to serve with Coastal Command until my demob.

January 1948 saw a resumption of company service. Returning to civvy life and to an uncertain future was not without its problems. Our age group went away as boys and came back as men with quite different attitudes and expectations. Re-employment with SWRS&S was conditional – a job for six months after which time a review would take place on the basis of “if we want to keep you and you want to stay”, presumably in that order. By mutual agreement I stayed with a review of my salary from £200 to £250 a year less the usual deductions and a “voluntary” contribution (deducted monthly) to the RNLI and the Blind Institute.

The lost years now had to be addressed particularly in area of commercial education and practice. It was evening classes at the Technical College for three/four nights a week, the odd correspondence course and attending a series of lectures at the Coal Exchange, designed to prepare you for professional qualifications, to be done in your own time and at your own expense. Day release was not heard of in those days. Social time was rather restricted. I continued to play Welsh League football on Saturdays and on Sundays my church involvement was very much a part of the social calendar.

After the Merthyr House Fire in March 1946 temporary accommodation was found in Ocean Buildings, Bute Street, until the eventual move to Colum Buildings in 1947. I was employed in the Stores Dept. (later named the Purchasing Dept) where our very small office housed Morton Llewellyn (son-in-law of Douglas Smith) Harry Caswell, Departmental Head, Bill Camp, John Crockett, myself and the occasional Jack Smith. Douglas Low, our main director had a tiny office ill-becoming of a Director of the Company.

Early on after my return to the office, John Crockett and I were given the task of compiling an inventory of unbroached cabin drystores and cabin/galley sundries on the “Samwinged”, a liberty ship being handed back. We were amazed at the stocks on board and the over supply of so much as was usual by Americans. Religiously, we carried out this to the letter, but Lionel Ford who was in attendance noticed a small barrel of salt beef which brought lights to his eyes. This was left off the inventory and obviously found its way to an undisclosed destination. The list was keenly scrutinized back at the office and instructions given to arrange by whatever means, the transfer of a quantity of drystores. Getting anything off the dock was a perilous task particularly as we had no transport and we were not anxious to lose our careers before they had really started. However, Lionel Ford told us not to worry and to leave it to him. After receiving these words of comfort it was put to the back of our minds whilst we carried on with our stores inventory.

One evening on leaving the ship we were offered a lift by " Jones of Western Scaling" – a rogue if ever there was one. Accepting rather than walk, we sat uncomfortably in the back of his Austin saloon and on arriving at the dock gates, the policeman stopped us and Jones politely said he was giving a couple of young Smiths' Superintendents a lift back to the office – adding " the poor buggers have had a hard day ". Through the gate we sailed and back at the office found to our amazement the back seat we had sat on concealed a hidden boot containing all the items listed which Lionel Ford was taking care of !! We hurriedly transferred the lot to the Stores Dept where the spoils covered two large desks . The following day Morton Llewellyn took control and apportioned the 'goodies' as was his want, and as an appreciation to John and myself, he presented us each with a very large jar of mayonnaise, which no one else would want. There is a moral to that story, but I'll leave it to the readers to think about it !!

The early fifties saw the Stores Dept move out of Colum Buildings because of overcrowding, to 10 Mountstuart Sq. and the old NatWest Bank office. It gave us more storage space and also to house the new Radio Dept. Douglas Low being a keen radio 'ham' devoted much of this time working with the Radio Advisory Service and Trinity House formulating and establishing a UK Radio Beacon Navigational Service. He was considered by his peers to be a bit of a loose cannon and often the subject of much derision, which in my opinion was undeserved. However, he made the decision to establish our own supply of Radio Officers getting away from Marconi and International Marine Radio. Frank Sully, then IMR manager was recruited, later to be joined by Jim Harrison (ex- RAF). Years later, the Radio Dept. became part of the Technical Dept, something which Frank always wanted but was never really comfortable with.. The reasons for his discomfort will remain undisclosed.

The 1950's saw much change in the structure of the company. Six senior members of staff were appointed Executive Directors in appreciation of their long service, loyalty, and experience. The family Board members were sadly depleted through deaths of - Sir William (d.1950) Arthur Popham (d.1951) Bill Liley (d.1955) and Douglas Low (d.1955) . To compound the situation Sir William (3rd Bt.) left the company in 1953 to pursue other interests. This left Douglas Smith (Chairman) and Alan Reardon Smith (Vice Chairman) the only surviving family directors. The Golden Jubilee of the Company was celebrated in November 1955 with a grand evening where both Cardiff and London staff joined together, most probably for the first time .

It was under the direction of the Chairman and Vice Chairman that a new head office was built in Greyfriars Road, appropriately named " Devonshire House" to which we moved in December 1958.

It is here that I leave the chronological events to be resumed at a later time, and mention some of the "characters" who brightened my life and helped me enormously during my climb up the ladder.

The complete list would read like a section of "Who's Who" and there is a danger I might leave someone out. However, my early days were influenced by people like Spencer Kemp, Fred Ward (Alfie's brother), and Harry Caswell.

After the War I had tremendous help and advice from R.B. Smith and Lionel Ford – men with big voices and even bigger hearts. Harry Fraser was also one of my mentors. I recall with great respect men like Brice Thomas, Vic Doughty, Mark Higgins, Carnaffan, Shotton, Picton Davies, Ginger Harris, Alfie Ward, Sid Leebetter, Lloyd Evans, Jake Vaughan, Lloyd, Cox, Bill Lawday, Jack Lemon – Harry Orr, Lionel Wainwright, Tommy Gray, Arthur Thompson, Wyn Evans, Sukenick (?? spelling) and so many more Chief Stewards – Finlay, Parselle, Sanday, Lindsay, Swain, Carre, Peach, Beasey, B.E.L. Smith, John Loudon, and so on! They were all loyal company men, as were so many others who have crossed the bar.

There were those one could write a book about - Billy Beacon, our Relief Chief Steward/Cook who was a one-off. Then there was our very own Jack Smith whose antics defied description. I can recall when we used Falmouth to change crews and take stores, Capt. Jack having been thrown out of so many hotels found it difficult to find accommodation. A very able man but sadly too attached to the bottle for his own good. Perhaps at a later contribution to "Shipmates" we can relate a few stories so that with our memories we can have a smile or two.

Ofcourse, the company had their rotten apples but these were few and far between – the quality of their men, both afloat and ashore were top class. Shore side we did have one or two who had first class degrees from the University of Hindsight, but you always get someone who is wise after the event.

Sadly, the camaraderie enjoyed by sea staff could not be replicated shore side, mainly because of the 9 to 5 working conditions and unlike shipboard conditions where you eat, drink, work, and (metaphorically speaking) sleep together, office staff seldom get together socially. You do get to know individuals and able to assess their ability and talent in relation to the role they fulfill but personal dependability seldom arises.

The Editor agrees with me a long article can be self-defeating so my memories and wanderings will continue at a later date.

I'll keep the stories until then.
Meanwhile best wishes,

Roy Burston
Formerly Purchasing Director (& Office Wallah)

Radar? Who needs it?

This article is about two incidents that involved just the one ship, namely the m.v. "Eastern City" of 5,195 gross tons, built in 1941 by Doxfords of Sunderland. The all-British crew of 36 officers and men had joined the vessel on the 24 February 1960 in Belfast. The voyage was the usual Reardon Smith "tramlines" In ballast to the U.S. Gulf coast - load Soya beans in New Orleans for discharge at Kawasaki, Japan, in ballast to West Australia to load wheat for discharge at Alexandria. Back to Australia for a similar cargo, this time discharge at Bombay. Back to Australia to load yet another wheat cargo, this time for discharge at three ports in the Republic of Ireland, Cork, Waterford and Dublin to pay off.

The "Eastern City" was a well found shelter deck tween deck vessel with engine room amidships. She could load around 8,500 tons to summer marks. She was powered by a Doxford LBJ opposed piston diesel engine with a rated N.H.P of 402. She could usually steam at about 10 knots fully laden in fair weather conditions. With five holds all fitted with the means to erect lower hold shifting boards and tween deck grain feeders, she was a classic grain loading tramp ship that had survived many voyages in convoys across the N.Atlantic in the Second World War. She was fitted with a gyro compass, radio D.F receiver, an echo sounder, but no radar

In the early 1960's, radar was still a relatively new toy for merchant ships, but Reardon Smiths were among the forefront of British shipping companies and were fitting radar sets to their fleet of about 18 ships. It was planned to fit radar to the "EasternCity" at her next dry-docking.

On her last call to Western Australia to load wheat for Ireland, the Master, Captain Albert Justen received his load port orders as the ship cleared the Lombok Strait southbound. We were to load a full cargo at Albany. We had visited Albany on the two previous visits to Australia and many on board had made friends in that port. The Warner family who ran the Harbour Tea Rooms on the Town Pier next to the grain elevator, were very popular. Perhaps the fact that they had two pretty teenage daughters, Anne and Judy, accounted for the fact that the café was never short of customers when a Smith's ship called in.

Captain Justen had Ernie Tickner as his Chief Officer, David Pratt as Second Officer with yours truly as the 3rd. Mate (clutching a brand new 2nd. Mate's Certificate). Jim Louden (brother of John Louden) was the Sparks. The chief Engineer was Jack Partington, Second Engineer was John Dutton and the chief Steward was Barney Lee.

Albany in Western Australia some 350 miles south of Fremantle was situated at the head of the King George Sound. The Sound enclosed a perfect natural harbour but the approach was between two headlands only a mile apart. Although the entrance channel was well charted with no dangers, a strong cross current at the entrance meant vessels had to be on their guard as they approached the Sound.

On the evening of the 12th October 1960, our ship was making a slow and careful approach to the entrance to the Sound. Ernie Tickner with the Bosun and Carpenter was standing by the anchors. Captain Justen had the con. Jim Louden was stationed at the echo sounder as the revolving trace showed the gently shelving depth under the keel and calling out the depths. Yours truly standing by the telegraph with the movement book in hand. Suddenly, a heavy rain squall with torrential rain swept over the ship completely blocking out our view ahead. Since we had already entered the heads, we really had no choice but to carry on. Captain Justen called the Mate and told him to report

anything he saw. Jim Louden called out the soundings as we moved into the Sound. The captain kept referring the sounding obtained by the sounder to the depths shown on the chart. After quite a long period of groping our way ahead - no radar assistance remember - the captain called out to the Mate forward to stand by to let go and just as the anchor brakes were released and the anchor rattled out of the pipe, the rain cleared and there about 2 cables ahead of us was the fixed red light marking the edge of land at the side of the Sound. We were exactly on the symbol of an anchor drawn on the chart that indicated the recommended anchorage.

Captain Justen called the Mate to come up to the bridge and ordered us all down to his cabin for a celebratory peg. I said that I was on watch and had to stay on the bridge. "Tell the A.B. to keep an eye on things and report to my cabin at once!" says Albert. So with only about 30 minutes to go before the watch changed, I had to endure a stiff shot of rum, as Captain Justen saluted his "hard core of steel." His words, not mine. I got back on the bridge just as the 2nd. Mate came up to relieve me. "You've been drinking." He says, "better make sure you don't breath over the Old Man." What a joke!

The second occasion when we could have done with an early fitting of a radar set came during the last stages of the current voyage. Captain Dai Beynon had relieved Captain Justen for leave while the ship was on the Irish coast. The ship had already discharged a part cargo in Cork and a similar amount in Waterford. We were scheduled to sail from Waterford for Dublin at 0800 on a Sunday morning and the Irish river pilot boarded on time. We let go and moved out into mid river. We slowly gathered way and left the town behind. After about fifteen minutes, the Mate standing by forward was relieved for breakfast by Dave Pratt, the Second Mate. Captain Dai and myself together with the pilot, helmsman and lookout made up the bridge team.

Without any warning, we suddenly entered a dense bank of fog. Visibility less than 100 yards. The Irish pilot, Captain Sean Kelly seemed unabashed by the sudden reduction in visibility. "Tell the Mate forward to report when he sees the next channel buoy." And so we slowly steamed on. As we passed one buoy, the forward gang would call out that they had the next buoy in sight. So far, so good. Then the fog became as thick as a boot. No sign of any more buoys. "Stop engines!" shouts the pilot. I jumped to telegraph and rang Stop Main engines. Then a call from forward. A small white lighthouse visible on the starboard beam, then a stone breakwater on the same side. "Bejasus, I know where we are now"says Capt Kelly, "Emergency full astern - we're steaming into Duncannon Harbour! I just hope the car ferry is not tied up for the weekend at this end!"

I rang a double ring on Full astern on the telegraph, then answered the ER telephone as the engineer on the controls below queried the double ring. "Obey the bloody telegraph," I hissed into telephone, we're just about to run aground!" I had the echo sounder running and watched as the depth line slowly came up to zero. The fog of course was now clearing fast. Looking forward, I saw the bow rise up as we slid up the bank at the end of the harbour. "Don't let go of the anchors !" cries the pilot and then there was an almighty crash as the bow hit something really hard. Captain Beynon and the pilot both fell over. But, fortunately the car ferry was not lying alongside the quay.

The Second Mate told us all afterwards what had happened. He was looking over the bow down to the bow as it ploughed into a stone quay, burying itself about 20 feet into the land. Just ahead of the bow as it came to rest, was a neat line of front gardens and pretty little cottages. Out of one of these cottages, ran a man with a piece of toast and a cup of tea in his hand. He looked up and our Second Mate looked down at him. Then the man turned and ran back into his cottage. Our main engines which had been churning away at emergency full astern, then took effect and we came shooting backwards out of the gash we had made in the quay, pulling two big stone blocks out of the quay

wall with it. We moved quickly astern and were once again swallowed up in the fog lying as a thick bank in the centre of the harbour.

We all imagined what the man who ran back into his cottage would have made of it all. He probably ran back inside his house to say to his wife. "Quick, Bridie, come and see, there a big boat just outside the house." She would have run out to see and what did she see, no ship, we were hidden by the fog. I guess she will have stopped his tap!!

Well, we anchored outside Duncannon and did the usual checks. No penetration of the hull and the bow, which was of the upright riveted construction with a solid stem bar, showed no evidence of its encounter with Duncannon Dock. A diver's inspection in Dublin revealed only paint scratches under the keel. They built them well those days in Doxfords. We all had to give statements to the P & I Club's lawyers in Dublin and the Company accelerated the fitting of radar to the fleet

Bryan Boyer..

THE MATES NIGHTMARE

As part of their education, our two daughters were made to keep a daily diary of the voyage. This was sometimes difficult to do in that, as we all know, on long ocean passages, material was a bit thin on the ground and they would be struggling to find anything of interest to record!

Whilst sifting through junk in the loft, I came across Debbie's diary written whilst on the "New Westminster City" in March 1973. She was 9 at the time.

I reproduce verbatim her contribution for Friday, March 16th 1973:-

AT SEA "It is still a bit rough and sometimes the water comes on deck. I love to see the spray. Yesterday night two big birds came on the ship. The Second Mate said one of them had slept on top of the floodlight on the wing of the bridge but the other one must have slept on the radar mast. Now, the Mate is really mad because the bird has messed up all the funnel and one side of the bridge deck which the crew have only just painted."

I remember the incident well- it cost me an extra beer at lunchtime to calm poor old Richard Vanner down!!!

John Cann

A friend of our member Richard Reardon Smith, ex Director of the Reardon Smith Line visited South Africa and saw the following cutting in the Cape Times newspaper dated, 3rd February, where the RSL Ships are mentioned with many other shipping companies.

**Trampship's beauty is way it forms – and remains –
global bulk shipping's backbone.**

As predicted, the bulk carriers have arrived, bringing grain from the South American pampas, and lorries are shuttling the cargo from the harbour to various storage facilities, while railway trucks line the quays for longer hauls.

These trampships have a cargo capacity of around 30,000 tons, more than treble the capacity of those vessels that even the slightly younger set will remember loading at Collier Jetty – adjacent to the Nelson Mandela Gateway – when South Africa exported grain by sea.

“Trampships” form the backbone of global bulk shipping. The term refers to ships – mostly bulk carriers – that have irregular trade patterns, calling at ports according to the availability of cargo.

Such a vessel might bring grain to Cape Town from La Plata and, once discharge has been completed she might sail in ballast to Durban to load steel for Turkey. Then she might go to Safi, Morocco, to load phosphates for New Orleans whence she will take a grain cargo to Japan.

Each voyage is governed by a charter party, a document that details the agreement between the shipowner and the charterer (hirer) for the charter of the ship, a procedure similar in principle to hiring a car. Some ships are taken on time charter, especially when a charterer, has several cargoes to move during a specified period or when a liner company requires an additional ship for a few months or even years. Sometimes a charterer fixes a ship on a bare-boat charter, in terms of which he has to arrange all aspects of the vessel's operation – crew, fuel, maintenance, dry-docking, insurance and more.

For much of the first half of last century, trampship operations were a vital sector within the British merchant navy, although many considered them less glamorous than the traditional liner companies.

However, those who served in the trampships were schooled in the best possible manner as their ships called at far-flung ports to load a wide variety of cargo.

On one voyage, cadets might be exposed to loading copra over the side at a tiny Polynesian anchorage, or sugar in the West Indies. Within weeks, they would be learning the secrets of stowing steel in Glasgow or Canadian wheat for discharge into bumboats on the Hooghli River, or cotton from the Mississippi to the Mersey.

In the heyday of grain exports from Cape Town, I saw under the chutes at the Collier Jetty several King Line vessels, some of Hogarth's Baron ships, units of the Hain fleet with the large H-logo on the funnel, Reardon-Smith's ships that bore the -City suffix, and others from equally famous British trampship companies. From the late 50s, the Greek, Panamanian and Liberian fleets grew rapidly to eclipse their British opposition, whose operating costs were far higher than those of the newcomers who could offer charterers a more favourable daily hire rate.

In the Cape's export season, class 10C railway locomotives – and later class S2 engines and diesels – shunted the grain trucks across the road to the elevator, much to the annoyance of those with urgent harbour business. Even pilots en route from their wardroom atop the old Harbour Café to ships in the Duncan Dock were delayed on occasions.

To add to their woes, refrigerated railway trucks were also shunted to the I & J cold store near the grain elevator, but delays were part of contemporary life in the docks.

Grain exports via Cape Town dwindled as other ports assumed greater importance in the trade and as larger ships were being used on the international grain trades.

East London could offer a depth of 10.4 metres at its grain berth whereas ships with a draught of 8m could berth at Collier Jetty.

More recently, the growing South African population meant less grain was available for export, and the occasional surplus production after good rains over the Highveld – augmented by significant volumes of imported grain – began to trundle across the Limpopo.

Some imported cargoes were stored in Cape Town's grain elevator until it came evident that the facility was obsolete and, as the Waterfront expanded, even the railway lines to the elevator were dismantled. These days Collier Jetty has not seen a freighter for several years, and accommodates many of I & J's stern trawlers and small fishing boats.

Carrying Brazilian timber cargoes, some trampships would arrive in Cape Town listing heavily after a rough South Atlantic voyage during which their deck cargo had either shifted, or become swollen with water, upsetting the mate's stability plans, a problem that has largely been solved as computerized, automated ballast transfer systems keep modern vessels on an even keel.

Since grabs are used to discharge grain at Cape Town, handling rates are relatively slow, a problem that is compounded by the fact that some importers' facilities are limited, causing further delays.

A temporary storage site close to the harbour is not the best, and perhaps it is time to consider the construction of a proper import terminal in Cape Town or Saldanha Bay. Suction equipment and improved landside logistics could complete the discharge in a day or two, cutting the time in port considerably.

And what of the British trampships? Gone – but never forgotten!

New Member

We welcome our new shipmate Mr. Ken Deacon from Lytham, Lancs. who sailed on the Reardon Smith ships.

A SONG FROM THE B.I. LINE

THE DOXFORD SONG

(Sung to the tune of "MacNamara's Band")

Instructions

In the chorus place two clenched fists in front of the face, vertically one above the other, and at the words Chuff!, Chuff! puff them apart to imitate an opposed piston action.

At a 'ships party' six females (or anyone) would be numbered 1 to 6 and during the chorus, with hands on heads with elbows sticking out (to imitate the Doxford piston's transverse beam), the "conductor" would get them to bob up and down in the firing order that he called, to replicate the action of the engine!

1. Oh my name is William Doxford and I come from Sunder-land
They say my diesel engine is the finest in the land
The pistons bang, the cranks go clang and the camshaft grinds away
And it's the bestest engine you could hear about today

Chorus

Dah dah dah dah Chuff! Chuff" Dah dah dah dah Chuff" Chuff!
Dah dah dah dah Chuff! Chuff" Dah dah dah dah.
Dah dah dah dah Chuff! Chuff" Dah Dah Dah – Dah
With action and reaction we'll go sailing on our way.

2. To see our engines functionals we open up a door
We find more cranks and crossheads than we've ever seen before
And then we pull the pistons out to calibrate the bore
And here for us to work on there are piston rings galore

Chorus

3. We calculate the horsepower by scientific means
With bits of string and paper wound on little round machines
We measure round the diagrams the power it should tell
The outcome's automatic but the engine's aw' ta hell

Chorus

(When the song has finished the ladies, exhausted, fall giggling to the floor – and then it's every man to himself!)

(Supplied by George Ball)

SITE THOUGHTS

Somewhere in the Persian Gulf
Where the sun is like a curse
And every day is followed
By one that's slightly worse.

There is a place called Abu Dhabi
Where a woman is never seen
Where skies are never cloudy
And the grass is never green.

Where the dust and flies are thicker
Than the burning desert sand
Just one of many tortures
Of this god forsaken land.

Where the drinking water's colour
Is like the drainage from the sink
And a man cannot drown his sorrows
'Cause there's not much beer to drink.

Somewhere in these tropic waters
Where the nights are made for love
The moon is like a spotlight
And stars all gleam above.

Now all the gleam and glitter
Of a lovely tropic night
Is merely a waste of beauty
For there is not a girl in sight.

You can have this Arab country
Where the mail is always late
Where a Christmas card in summer
Is considered up to date.

The expats are a hardy bunch
But not much cameradie
They're only here to bank the cash
As "Time Off" is rarely free.

Scandahooligans, Frogs and Yanks
and Japs
With plenty of British Too
Their ranks swelled out with Lebo's
To name but just a few

Driving here takes nerves of steel
As everyone will profess
To continue 'Tween dusk and dawn
First light will show the mess.

Where camels always have right of way
Make desert driving "hairy"
If an accident with a national
You'll not be treated fairly.

Where recreation is scarcely existing
And social life is slightly worse
And we really must be crazy
When we start to write a verse.

Take me back to good old England
The land I love so well
Away from this bloody island
A substitute for hell.

And when the lord sees me coming
I am sure that he will yell
"Come in you man from Abu Dhabi
You've done your stretch in hell!"

A contribution from Jon Hewson