

The Redcar Winkle !

It was a lovely day when I was born, my mother told me, I don't remember much about it.
I was brought (dragged) up living entirely in Redcar, racecourse on one side the sea on the other.

Didn't travel much - in summer us lads were given a rail pass and told to explore the nearby locations, mainly a trip to Darlington to see the main line trains, "Streaks" I think we called them, or it was heading to Whitby, fishing at the small bit of landing right next to the swing bridge - trying to catch the numerous small billet etc

My first outing at sea was when I was 12 - in 1957 - I used to meet my uncle and a couple of his friends, one being Joe Brown (not the one with the Bruvvers) who owned a fishing boat - "Venture 2" which was parked on Redcar Promenade.

Those were the days - quick discussion, either Coatham Bay for dog fish to bait the pots, Marske High for haddock, plaice, or Penny Hole for the bigger cod.

Very happy days which I believe led me to try a life at sea.

At the age of 16 years and 7 months I applied (well my father did) for an apprenticeship with B.P Tanker Co. Ltd. My father wanted me to join the Air Force - he said I could see the world - I wanted that part of it but wanted to be closer to the surface.

Anyhow I was accepted, so a couple of months later I got my orders - join the ship m.v 'British Builder' - my first ship and a romantic place to join - Florida, Australia etc. Not really - Hebburn, Tyne and Wear.

The taxi (until that time never been in one) arrived at 0900 - I was in tears, my mother and sisters were in tears - the cat would have been in tears but fortunately we didn't have one. Strangely the neighbours were not crying - thought I heard the words "good riddance" but I must have been mistaken. My first problem came when I got to the station - paid the driver and he started crying (I forgot the tip)

BP had sent a fully illustrated document explaining what I needed on a trip on one of their tankers - only the kitchen sink wouldn't fit in - the sea trunk itself was massive - could have brought back Nelson's body from Trafalgar in it.

Finally arriving in Newcastle I realised another predicament - I was worried that when I eventually got to a foreign land - how do you communicate ? BUT I was still in England - still couldn't understand a single word ! - anyhow I reached the dockyard. Asking where the 'Builder' was - told it was just along the dock next to one with a yellow funnel.

Arriving at the yellow funnel (a Shell) I had never seen a ship close up before so was completely perplexed as to where and how to board. The ship was covered in rusty paint - well in actual fact RUST.

Suddenly a friendly voice shouted are you with the 'Builder' ? I looked up and saw the first Indian I'd ever seen (only Chinese restaurants in Redcar) - anyhow together we managed to drag the chest into the accommodation and I was acquainted with my room (cabin) which I was to share with a fellow apprentice officer for the next 11 months.

What's happened to my life ? Everybody's speaking a strange language (and I don't mean the Indian crew).

The 'Builder' according to the drawing on the wall (sorry bulkhead) is approx 150 metres in length, 20 metres wide (sorry beam) and 12,000 tonnes dwt.

At first I was completely baffled by all the terminology - port and starboard etc. Soon found out where the galley was - all food was prepared by an Indian cook - rice was involved in every meal (except breakfast) which came as a complete surprise to me because until now the only rice I had eaten was rice pudding (with nutmeg) and on a really good day made with carnation milk.

Even though we were in dry-dock all meals were still taken at set times - in the Officers dining room which was set in the midship area of the ship - everyone was in uniform having changed from our working clothes.

Eventually the great day arrived when we finally set out to sea on my first maiden voyage to another exotic part of the UK - Queen Elizabeth 2 Jetty - Teesport, about 5 miles from my home. Looking back I could have put my case on a wheelbarrow and joined the ship there and saved on the taxi fare.

Unknown to me, the "old man" Captain L (all names have been altered to spare blushes and libel suits) had sent a telegram asking my mother and father to join us on the ship for a convivial evening.

They duly arrived and of course yours truly was volunteered to act as steward to hand out the drinks and food. I remember at the time all the officers were heavy smokers (60 - 100) a day because the price on the ship for alcohol and tobacco was free from VAT and duty - Capt L told my parents by the time I made 3rd Officer I would be the same. He did me one of best favours of my life - I resolved never to smoke - 50 years later I still haven't put one in my mouth.

Two days later we sailed for foreign lands with a cargo of gas oil, kerosene and aviation spirit. Thoughts of Long John Silver, parrots etc flashed through my mind and 36 hours later we arrived in Helsingborg (Elsinore) to discharge the cargo.

Whilst at sea the apprentices worked basically a 0800-1700 day - breakfast first and then an hour making out our Navigating Apprentice Journal which incorporated nautical terms, ship construction etc. For the first 18 months we were not really involved in the theory of navigation but were told to learn about splicing ropes, chipping rust off bulkheads, painting, and many other menial tasks which would at first glance seem to be at odds with becoming an Officer and more in keeping with BP having cheap labour.

But the old man imparted another pearl of wisdom for us younger apprentices with regard to the menial tasks - "when you finally make it as an Officer, if you have to instruct seamen to chip paint off a bulkhead you know what's it like to do it and what time you should allocate". A diktat I've always adhered to. Could it be, in this modern day, too many people are obtaining degrees in rather dubious subjects and then being fast - tracked into positions they are not really suited to - sorry about that - my final moan.

Our next port of call was Malmo. I did go ashore but we had little in the way of money - I believe our monthly wage was £13 and our expenditure was closely monitored by Capt L. I was more interested (sad) in what was happening on the jetties. The oil workers were fishing with hand-lines with chrome pipes with triple hooks on the bottom, straight off the end of the jetty into 20/30 metres of water and catching 5lb+ codling.

For the next 3 months the ship was based solely around the coast. It was very hard work. The Officers were on their usual watches 0400-0800 (mate Chief Officer) 0800-1200 (third Officer) and 1200-1600(second Officer) then 1600-2000 (chief Officer) - 2000-2400 (third) - 2400-0400 (second) but when going alongside (see getting to learn the lingo) or leaving port all the Officers and apprentices were involved and whilst in port the Mate was on duty at all times supervising loading/discharging cargo and the remaining Officers/apprentices worked 6hrs on and 6hrs off. If you wanted to go ashore - you didn't get any sleep.

The 'exotic' ports visited included Isle of Grain (BP Refinery), Grangemouth, Hamble, Barry, and Swansea - which reminds me, our crew were (apart from the stewards who were Roman Catholic) part of the Moslem faith, so they didn't drink and caused no trouble - except for Swansea.

Some of the crew went ashore and one of the younger seamen decided to have a drink and arrived back at the ship rather inebriated. All went below (down stairs to their accommodation - which was aft) a few minutes later the seaman appeared out of the accommodation - and ran along the flying bridge screaming, followed closely by one of the elders with a massive meat cleaver in his hand. I think the elder was rather annoyed with him.

But then the orders we were all wanting arrived - next port of call - Curacao - Dutch Caribbean.

At last break out the tropical gear.

Quite a good voyage - what will us lads get up to during the trip ? Will we get bored ?