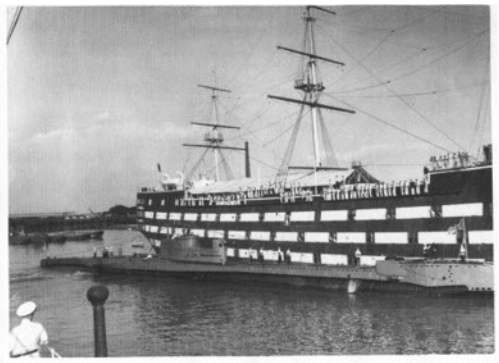
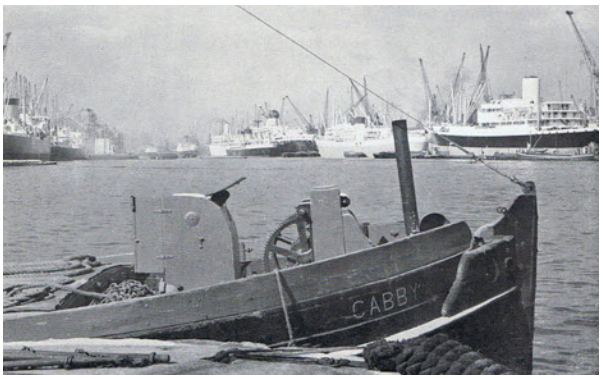
MY FIRST SHIP !

By Geoffrey Dunster Old Worcester 51-53

I left HMS "Worcester" at the end of July 1953 and anxiously awaited instructions at home to join my first P&O ship. Sure enough these arrived in early August and so at the end of the month I joined my first P&O ship in London's King George Vth Dock. My uniforms had been converted to P&O livery with company buttons & cap badge and midshipmans' patches to denote my new "rank". The ship - called the "Pinjarra" after a town in Western Australia - had just arrived from Australia which was her regular run.





King George V Docks

Like most UK shipping companies the P&O fleet had suffered many losses in WW2 and was trying to build up it's fleet again. A building programme was in force but meantime more or less any ship it could lay it's hands on was being used even if they did not meet their normal criteria. "Pinjarra" was a unique design in the P&O fleet - originally one of five sister ships (we once saw a twin when in Australia) had been built in the U.K. during the war when she had served as an Armed Merchant Cruiser in the North Atlantic. Allocated to P&O after the war by the Ministry of Transport, the armament was removed and she was refitted to convert the gun crew accommodation into passenger cabins for twelve but otherwise was a pretty basic design designed to meet wartime needs and lacked many facilities found on newer vessels.

** I recommend a look at Nick Messinger's (OW 58-61) P&O site to get a feel of P&O in those days. A brilliant site. HERE. and his Worcester site - HERE*

For example, her role on the North Atlantic mean she had a reasonable heating system for the accommodation but lacked any form of cooling system - a serious omission for a vessel which now spent much of the year in the tropics! She had a large bunker capacity but for freshwater storage was very limited and we often ran short on our longer legs which meant restrictions on the use of showers and the washing machine. A constant threat was if economy was not exercised was we would have load water at our "halfway" stop for bunkering in Aden - no idle matter since it was all produced in a desalination plant and its revolting taste could not be disguised in anything - even whisky or tea! Having been forced to load this vile concoction in Aden on one voyage our Captain braved the wrath of the Company accountants by pumping the vile stuff overboard when we arrived in Suez a few days later so that we could load Egyptian water.... something which was normally avoided at all costs!

The ship was nearly 10,000 gross tons and 500' feet long. Powered by a steam turbine installation, her service speed was 15 1/2 knots burning 10 tons of fuel a day. There were six cargo holds which were all served by electric winches - the main hold had two heavy lift derricks which could handle 100 ton loads. On one occasion we carried a catalytic cracker for an oil refinery in Western Australia - a huge device nearly of this weight which looked like a giant boiler.

However, it took so long to arrange the operation of these mega-derricks that a floating crane alongside was normally used for heavy loads of this size.

In the engine room there were four large diesel generators all of which were in operation when cargo was being handled. Repairing the winches was a constant problem as a result of the rough handling they received from stevedores of different nationalities many of whom could not read or write and ignored the operating instructions!

SS Pinjarra

Our total crew was around 95. P&O had a long tradition of Asian crews with Indian deckhands, Pakistanis in the engineroom and Goanese cooks and stewards. It can be imagined there was sometimes a degree of friction between the three - the Partition of India was not long past and Goa was still a Portugese colony - and the Goanese regarded themselves as somewhat superior to their Asian colleagues! We also had a Hong-Kong Chinese carpenter (who rejoiced in the name of Samuel Chow-Fong) and a winchman - they lived in solitary state in a small deckhouse away from the other Asians.

There were about 25 in each department and further 25 or so European "officers" - Captain, deck officers and apprentices made up about 10 of this number with a similar number of Engineers and Electricians. There was also a Chief Steward (assisted by a Storekeeper), a Radio Officer and a Doctor. During my time on this ship certain economies were introduced which included eliminating the Doctor; legally we were only obliged to carry one if the number on board exceeded 100 people. Each department had to loose one or two people to bring the total crew to 87 - we could then carry our 12 passengers and still be legal without a Doctor!

An early trip on my agenda was a prolonged visit to the bridge with monkey island above. The wheelhouse was a spacious area where the installation of a "Clearview" screen was in process - a small glass disc the size of a large dinner plate in a window frame. The disc span around at speed throwing off rain and spray and was then the height of 1950s sophistication. The steering wheel was located at the rear with it's hissing hydraulic connection to the steering engine far away in the stern. The magnetic steering compass stood immediately in front of the wheel and a gyro compass repeater just to one side - this driven by the master gyro which lived in a small locked room in the depths of the ship where it would be least affected by the ships motion. It was the size of a large dustbin and contained a large gyroscope rotating at high speed which was left running continuously throughout our voyage; in theory it could drive many repeaters but we had just two....the one by the steering wheel and the other mounted on the monkey island above which was used for taking shore bearings. Alongside this repeater was our main magnetic compass.....in this location it was least affected by the ships magnetic field. Our flag locker was also located in this area whose contents were maintained by our nimble fingered secunnies.

There were telephones connected to the engineroom, forecastle, stern & crows nest - a rarely visited feature uncomfortably located at the top of our foremast. A large brass handle operated the siren, an Aldis signalling light was ready for use and our sole electronic instrument indicated the angle of the rudder. There was a single telegraph to pass orders to the engine room and a screened off chart table in one corner.

Perhaps our radar installation was our best indication of the state of shipping at the time - an Admiralty pattern 268 model which was about as basic as it could be and had been installed towards the end of WWII. The display lurked behind a thick curtain where a 12" diameter screen was found with a small forest of control knobs. The actual set was housed in a deckhouse above the wheelhouse and was so complicated it required the services of our Radio Officer to turn it on and off. It took 30 minutes to come on line and then had to be shut down after two hours operation to enable it to cool down. The maximum range was 12 miles and the performance can only be described as limited. How different to the then contemporary equipment which were started with a single switch & viewed in the daylight.....

At the rear of the wheel house there was a chart room and the radio office. The chartroom housed our library of charts and publications, the various logbooks a gimbal mounted mercury barometer, and the heart of our navigation system - a pair of gimballed chronometers stored in a padded locker which were ceremoniously wound at the same time every day by the Second Officer - traditionally the Ships' Navigator whose cabin was festooned with reminders to do so! We also had a rather basic echo sounder which allegedly recorded the depth on sensitised paper.


P&O s.s. 'PINJARRA'

In the chart room was a mounting for a "Decca Navigator" receiver. This equipment had been developed in WWII and was then the very latest in navigational aids. Using special charts, a continuous read-out of our position could be plotted accurately to a mile or so irrespective of weather conditions. Unfortunately, the service only covered certain parts of the world and although Europe was fairly well served it was not available in most other areas. The equipment was only available to lease and the Company only had a limited number on contract. These were normally landed passing Suez southbound and fingers where kept crossed that there would be one available on our return to Europe! Sadly the device was phased out when the vastly superior satellite navigation was later introduced.

The radio office was very much the preserve of "Sparks" as the Radio Officer was known. In accordance with tradition of the time, our radio installation was owned and operated by Marconi Marine organisation whose employee the radio officer was. Much of the equipment was not only somewhat dated and a little basic - a pair of ex-Admiralty receivers, the main transmitter, an emergency spark transmitter and a direction finder. All contact with the outside world was by Morse and the effectiveness of our rather basic installation largely depended on the skill & experience of the operator; even so we were sometimes out of contact with the outside world for some hours in adverse conditions. We had no radiotelephone equipment and we depended on a flashing light signals for short range contact with other vessels and shore stations. In addition, Sparks had in his care our portable emergency Lifeboat Transceiver which was solemnly tested at our weekly lifeboat drill when at sea.


Example Radio Room

A listening watch was kept on a two-hours-on: two hours off basis with an eight hour break overnight: however, the watch times had to coincide with the radio area we were transiting and

sometimes Sparks had some very early or late starts if local "ships time" -which sometimes could change daily - was at variance with our position in the zone. For safety reasons, our radio installation was operated by a large bank of batteries which some would say resembled car batteries - Sparks spent a lot of his time maintaining this power supply which was constantly being recharged from the ships' supply

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The normal routine for our six-month voyages was the ship would normally head for London Docks as the last call inbound from Australia to commence discharging. After a week or so we would then make the "Continental Voyage" with about half the normal European crew being relieved by temporary staff during their leave period. This voyage took two or three weeks and would normally include brief calls at Rotterdam, Antwerp, Hamburg & Bremen. In addition we also visited ports on the East Coast of England such as Hull, Newcastle, & Middlesborough. Our calls were made not only to continue the discharge of cargo from Australia & Ceylon but to commence loading for the next deepsea voyage. Our annual dry docking taking 4-5 days would sometimes be fitted into this trip somewhere when the underwater section of the hull would be surveyed and repainted.

Eventually we would return to London Docks for a further week or so, the regular crew would return - and sometimes new members would join. Final loading of cargo would take place also a huge mass of stores - fresh and frozen food for the crew and passengers, linen, stores for the ship and engine room, items under bond -mainly tobacco & liquor - for sale to the crew, together with detailed loading plans of where everything was located so it could be discharged without delay on arrival.

Sometimes cargo was being exported under "Customs Drawback" - this was a means of gaining exemption from the then Purchase Tax which entailed a bored Customs man solemnly counting the items concerned which sometimes ran into several hundred!

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Amongst the last to join were our twelve passengers for whom there were six single and three double cabins. Many preferred the informality of a cargo ship which at the time was cheaper than a passenger ship and took somewhat longer to make the trip. The cabins were furnished to a fair but basic standard but all lacked "private facilities" with bathrooms and toilets were located in the corridors nearby. Although cabins were serviced by the stewards there was no room or laundry service. A lounge was provided for the passengers which had a small bar that opened briefly before lunch and dinner when the ship was at sea; there was also a small library. Occasionally the Senior Officers would join them in the bar before Dinner.

Their meals were taken seated with the more senior officers in the Dining Room with traditional British fare being served but always with a curry available at lunchtime in the P&O tradition. Entertainment was limited to a shuffleboard layout on the boat deck and deck quoits. There was no TV or films but the Radio Officer would normal turn on the lounge loudspeaker to relay the BBC Overseas Service news at noon.

Once or twice during the voyage the more curious passengers were permitted to make a supervised visit to the bridge, engine-room and galley; the last two always provoked the common how could people work in such heat - and noise in the case of the Engine Room!

Passengers were also granted access to two other facilities reserved for the use of the European crew - the laundry room and our "swimming pool". The laundry room had two washing machines and facilities for drying and ironing. The more obliging lady passengers occasionally undertook the ironing of our shirts and etc. as a pass-time....a neat pile of finished gear was occasionally found as a pleasant surprise!

The "swimming pool" was located on the forward cargo deck in a convenient rarely used space and consisted of a stout timber frame made by a previous ships carpenter about 5' deep and 15' square with a step ladder up one side. When at sea in the warmer areas a stout canvas lining was placed inside and a fire hose connected. The hydrant was left running continuously and, when full, the pool overflowed onto the deck and drained into the scuppers - no heating or filtration plant required as the sea could be lukewarm and the pool only used when well offshore! It all sounds a little crude but it was certainly a most welcome facility which not all our ships had.....and the phosphoresce at night had to be seen to be believed as the water overflowed.

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Of course, I was mainly concerned with the Deck Department. For our captain Leonard Hill, it was his first voyage in command with the P&O which he had joined in the mid-30s from Pangbourne. He had wartime service with the Royal Navy as a member of the RNR and had been awarded the DSC when captain of a destroyer. Later in his service with the Company he became Senior Master (or Commodore) and finished his time with them in command of the famous "Canberra"; he also became Master of the Honourable Company of Master Mariners. He was a most charming man who took great interest in the progress of the four Cadets we carried and frequently had afternoon tuition sessions for us in his splendid quarters during the quieter part of our trips; occasionally those on "day work" arrived smelling somewhat of paint or oil depending on the jobs we had been doing. I recall his words when I was first introduced to him - "This is a new experience for both of us!"

Our Chief Officer Jack Clifford - for whom the "Pinjarra" was also his first appointment in the Rank - was another fine man who clearly was heading for a Command of his own in the not too distant future but I learnt some years later he had to take up a shore job with the Company due to ill-health. He had been at sea since the war years and delighted in sharing his skills with us. His duties when not on the bridge included caring for the maintenance of the ship and supervising the cargo.

The Second Officer John Neale - another Pangbourne man and somewhat of an eccentric - was our highly proficient Ships Navigator who keep the 12-4 watch AM & PM - no wonder he was eccentric lacking a complete nights sleep whenever the ship was at sea. His beloved pipe was often concealed in his jacket pocket where it smoked quietly away! He later left the Company to become a Trinity House pilot based on the Thames.
As the Ships' Navigator he had custody of our library of navigational publications and charts which numbered several hundred; the stock covered not only our normal routes but any diversion we might reasonably expect en route such as ports in the Mediterranean, Persian Gulf, Indonesia or Malaya. The weekly Admiralty "Notices to Mariners" pursued the ship around the world containing any amendments which could mean considerable work for the Navigator in the event of major changes on numerous publications ...less taxing changes were passed on to any legible cadet that was available!

Third Officer Bunny Gordon - a fellow OW - was on his first appointment in charge of a watch and was a huge help to Cadets to whom he was our Tutor and supervised the Correspondence course we were all taking and completion of our weekly journal. One of his traditional and more irksome

jobs was writing up - in his best handwriting and always with the same pen and colour of ink - a fair copy of the Ships Log book which was solemnly delivery to the Directors by the Captain at the end of the voyage. The Log Book which provided the information was a massive tome that was completed on a hourly basis by the current watchkeeper who always seemed to use a different pen so was very much a working document!

Our Fourth Officer Peter Padfield - another OW - had just received his Second Mates Certificate but kept watches with the Chief Officer; he frequently was left on his own in open waters when the Chief was out and about on the ship supervising the crew. Peter later found fame as a much respected naval-historian and author.

We carried four Cadets - who would have been called Midshipmen in the RN and legally were apprentices of the Company - all of whom had attended one of the pre-sea training establishments. Our Senior was Steve Townsend - ex "Conway" - nearing the end of his three year apprenticeship; he was transferred to another of the Company's ship whilst we were in Australia which had become shorthanded due to illness of one of the Deck Officers. Steve remained with the Company for many years and narrowly missed becoming Commodore before retirement.
We had two Cadets of similar seniority from whom the "Pinjarra" was their second ship. Both had trained at Warsash College . One was Ken McLean - who also later became a Trinity House pilot in the Solent - whose father was a Suez Canal pilot and in consequence the only one amongst our passengers and crew allowed ashore in Egypt during our transit of the Suez canal! The other was David Banks - former cathedral chorister! - who later became a pilot in Singapore and subsequently Harbour Master of Falmouth.

Finally, there was me....in a very strange world to start with but I was lucky to share our cabin with three delightful companions. Our cabin was a modest affair containing four double-decker bunks, a washbasin, four small wardrobes and two drawers apiece.....all fitted into the smallest space imaginable! Adjacent was a very small study with table & settee. Located in a deckhouse on the boat deck - which also had three other officers cabins & a shared bathroom - it became very warm in hot weather. We did have fairly efficient hot air blowers for use in colder climes if you could tolerate the sprinkling of soot that arrived with the heated air. Laundry was a do-it-yourself affair and "our" steward did nothing other than deliver daily tea & coffee and a weekly supply of clean linen.

When the ship was "working cargo" one or more of the cadets was on "cargo-watch" supervising loading or discharging and keeping an eye open for pilferage - a constant problem with some of our cargoes. One hold contained huge strong rooms in which highly valuable cargo such as currency would be stowed. Supervision was necessary since the better the stow of cargo the more could be fitted in and the voyage more profitable!

When we were at sea two of the cadets would be "day-workers" for half the voyage and change over in Sydney. Our jobs varied tremendously - maintenance of various parts of the ship such as painting, splicing of the wire derrick hoists, checking the five timber lifeboats which were regularly launched to ensure they did not leak to excess When in London we found ourselves running errands to the P&O Dock Office who normally had several Company ships in London docks simultaneously; when abroad we would go along as witnesses with the Captain when he called on the local British Consul on official business.

One of my first jobs was to pay a visit to the Shipping Office to secure my Identity Card & Discharge Book - this entailed a visit to a nearby rather scruffy photographer for a "mug-shot" clutching my official number in the best traditions of the Prison Service! I was also finger printed twice over - once for my ID card & again for the shipping records department in Cardiff.

Only then, could I be signed on as an official member of the crew and get paid - though at the rather modest rate of £75 a year.....of which we were only permitted to draw £5 each month less deductions for our bar purchases of cigarettes, beer & chocolate so sometimes all we had was a handful of change!

All cadets practised Signals for half an hour every day when we were at sea and this soon made us very adept at the Morse Code & Semaphore. We often called up other ships passing at sea for a chat on the Morse Lamp in the quieter areas and sometime found an OW at the other end of the light who we had not seen for years. We were fortunate in "Pinjarra" that a relic of her wartime service was a naval style "Signal Projector" positioned on top of the bridge which was vastly superior to the normal Aldis Lamp in terms of speed of use & range. Even semaphore has it's use in daylight sending a message along the length of the 250 ' foredeck....

In the few days before sailing on our coastal voyage I concentrated on getting to know the ship and learning the names and faces of the Officers. Amongst the deck crew, there were six helmsman or "secunnies" who always wore "sailors rig" and guarded the gangway in port and steered the ship at sea; they had to have a good command of the English language for obvious reasons so were always a useful link when problems arose since my knowledge of Urdu used by most of the crew was strictly limited at the time!

Not a problem with the Goanese staff who nearly all spoke excellent English since most had been with P&O for many years and had previously served on the passenger ships as both bedroom & catering stewards.

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And so we set sail for Antwerp - not too far away but a complicated journey for a ship of our size. It was told to understudy a fellow cadet in the wheelhouse and "look & learn - but not too many questions!" The Captain and Chief Officer were on the bridge, the Third Officer with one cadet on the bow and the Second Officer at the stern with our last cadet.

Also on the bridge were two secunnies - the senior one on the steering wheel for this delicate task of getting us out of the Dock. In charge was our Dock Pilot who, with the aid of two tugs and a lot of signalling on his pocket whistle and the ships siren, manoeuvred us from our berth, turned the ship around and down the dock and into the lock. Here the Dock Pilot was replaced by a River Pilot. The dock tugs were left behind as the lock gates closed and two river tugs were waiting for us in the river outside. We merged in the dark into the Thames and with one tug on a bow line and the other pushing on our stern round we at last pointing downstream. Our bow tug stayed with us until the river widened a few miles downstream and we were on our own at last - we cruised at about ten knots which gave us adequate control with the rudder.

We passed the "Worcester" in the dark and soon afterwards arrived at Gravesend where we change pilots once more - the Sea Pilot took us to the Pilot Station off Harwich when we then had to make passage unaided across the North Sea to the entrance to the River Schedlt where a Belgian pilot boarded to take us to Antwerp. During this passage we worked up to our normal cruise speed of 15 1/2 knots and I heard the banshee wail from our engine gearbox which was a unique feature of this design of ship.....I was to get to

know & hate this unique & horrible sound very well over the next 18 months!

After passage through a series of locks we reached our berth and commenced loading and unloading assorted cargo which - unlike in London - continued around the clock until the task was complete. In Antwerp, I had my first experience of the Mission to Seamen in action - the invariably cheerful Chaplain visited us and told us of the delights of his establishment; uniquely in Europe "The Mission" boasted a fine indoor swimming pool which was a great attraction in the warm autumn we were enjoying so a time for the mini-bus to collect us was arranged.... this was the first of many visits to this organisation across the world which continues to do so much today for seafarers of all nationalities.

All too soon we were on our way to Rotterdam and Hamburg for brief calls then off to the North of England to load steel products for Australia. Firstly to a very rundown Middlesborough where we had a problem with the desertion of several of our Pakistani engine room staff apparently heading for the boiler-rooms of factories in the Midlands; our departure was delayed whilst substitutes were bussed in from other Company ships down South. This delay allowed us to visit the still-flourishing local Variety Theatre where we saw an act called Morecambe & Wise booed off the stage!.

Then on to Immingham, an isolated harbour on the River Humber opposite Hull but close to the steel town of Scunthorpe. Immingham was connected by a rickety tramway to nearby Grimsby.....we noticed many of our Asian crew taking this precarious journey since it was apparently one of the best places in the UK to buy second hand (very) hand-cranked sewing machines to set their wives up in business back home!

Finally, back to London for a final session of loading before our departure for Australia. We loaded sufficient oil fuel to get us as far as Aden - then the Clapham Junction of shipping where most ships called to load bunker fuel as it was the lowest price along the route for traffic routing via the Suez Canal bound for India, Australia and the Far East.

Our relief crew departed, the twelve passengers joined and we departed for our first call at Marseilles - a passage of about a week. The Chief Steward circulated the officers taking orders for the Duty Free stores of alcohol and tobacco which would be unsealed as soon as we had dropped our pilot off Dungeness and we were outside the "twelve mile limit". During our passage down the Thames the crew lowered the derricks for our sea passage and the carpenter secured our six cargo hatches - each was closed by snug fitting wooden hatch covers which in turn were covered by three stout tarpaulins. This were secured by metal bars with scores of wooden wedges to keep them in place.

We first had acquaintance with our passengers in the Dining Room at dinner - nearly all of late-middle age who did not mind if the ship was delayed since their fare was paid and remained the same no matter how long the trip took. Our contact with the passengers was minimal - "Only speak if spoken to" seemed to be the rule for the lower orders. The following day most of the passengers did not appear since we were busy crossing the Bay of Biscay which took 24 hours - but they reappeared as we ran down the Portugese & Spanish coast and organised themselves into teams for shuffleboard, bridge and the like; inevitably there was one self-important individual who made himself the Chairman of the Entertainments Committee who was tolerated by his 11 fellow passengers.

As we approached Gibraltar the weather turned distinctly warmer and the order was passed we would change into "whites" - shorts, open necked shirts and long white stockings & white canvas shoes during the day with a switch in the evenings to white jacket & trousers in the evenings for dinner. On this trip, this rig came very familiar since it was retained in use until we reached Suez homeward bound some months later.

Part of the learning process was to find out how the rest of the crew ticked away from their official duties - I discovered our Third Engineer was a dab hand at photography and had a side-line developing & printing films (he even had an enlarger!) and several of the Goanese stewards fancied themselves as barbers. This practice was carried out in fine weather on the boat deck and most potential customers patiently waited to see whom the Captain would patronise thus ensuring a reasonable job! The Captain's personal steward had some useful tips on starching our white uniforms and the Doctor solemnly lectured us on caring for the library books of which he was the custodian for the voyage.

After a brief stop of two or three nights in Marseilles we had a similar stay in Genoa a few hours steaming away. Marseilles had long been an important link in the P&O chain since travellers bound to or from India on the passenger ships frequently added to their vacation period by joining or leaving their ship here - they could take the train across France to the UK in 24 hours which also saved a possible rough ride across the Bay of Biscay and in the English Channel.

Genoa was memorable for the huge amount of parcel post mailbags we loaded for Australia - I was reliably informed this was largely made up of parcels of pasta being sent to emigrant Italians in Australia so they would not starve or miss Momma's traditional dishes. We also filled our freshwater tanks with the last "decent" water until Australia still some weeks away - I also learnt that Colombo fresh water was OK but very expensive by comparison to Genoa and Fremantle! We headed down the western side of Italy with our captain fretting about the passage of the narrow Straits of Messina - chris-crossed by a constant procession of ferries with a never ending string of north and south bound vessels to confuse the issue. Happily, we had a daylight transit on a clear day but I later experienced a night passage in mist where the captain really earnt his money!

Our next call was Port Said at the northern end of the Suez Canal. At the time the canal was still under the management of the "Canal Suez" company largely which was managed by French and British staff who also made up the majority of the pilots. We anchored at the entrance to the canal awaiting our convoy which left a few hours later. A multitude of officials came on board and fellow cadet Ken McLean was whisked ashore - he seem to know a multitude of the locals as he had grown up locally and was determined to make the most of his twelve hour visit to his parents before joining the ship again in Suez.

Two small mooring boats were craned on board - they were there to help in mooring us up during our transit - but they also had the lockers in their boats packed with souvenirs which they tried to sell to the crew during their time on board. We also had two Egyptian policemen armed with

elderly .303 rifles - for which they had no ammunition - ready to guard us from the Israelies if they attacked en route.

After a few hours the anchor was raised and we manoeuvred into the canal in our convoy of a dozen assorted ships with our main task to keep correctly spaced from the ship ahead - every few miles there was a signal station with a giant clock on the side showing how many minutes since the ship ahead had passed.... as we passed it was zeroed for the benefit of the next ship. Our pilot was constantly requesting small changes of engine speed to keep our spacing whilst our secunny strived to keep the ship in the centre of the canal which was only a little deeper than our draught of 30' - nowadays the Canal is twice as deep!

About one third of the way through the canal we diverted into a short section of bypass canal where we moored up for a time whilst a northbound convoy went past in the main canal; our Egyptian boatmen leapt into action in an Egyptian way and lugged our mooring lines up to the line of bollards which stretched the length of the canal.

Under way once more, our next diversion was at the Great Bitter Lakes where another northbound convoy was anchored waiting for us to pass and we proceeded smoothly on our way. During our transit the Captain more or less lived on the bridge, likewise the Chief Engineer in the engine room. As an added safety precaution, our two Electricians took turns in the Steering Gear room where two electro-hydraulic rams operated the rudder "just in case". On a night transit, they would have been replaced by engineers since the electricians were then responsible for the operation of the searchlight mounted in our forecastle which normally was concealed by a decorative shield on the bow; this was opened up like a gunport and the searchlight moved forward to protrude through the stem. It was mounted on a form of gun-carriage as the wooden walls of yesteryear and was only used for this canal transit. Ships which did not have a searchlight installed had to hire one from the canal company; a precarious looking arrangement - complete with portable generator - which was suspended over the bow.

Finally we arrived in Suez - our twelve hour passage of 100 miles only took two hours by road so our logbooks and other assorted paper work was quickly transported to rejoin us; the Canal Company based their dues on the type and destination of the cargo so some rapid calculations were made during our transit using the cargo manifests. At the time payment was only accepted in Swiss francs and the toll always made it just cheaper to use Suez rather than a lengthy diversion around Africa! Happily, Cadet Mclean also rejoined replete from his brief visit home complete with clean laundry!

Our passage of nearly four days down the Red Sea was chiefly notable for the amazing heat and we had sympathy for our engineering colleagues where the temperature in the engine and boiler room frequently exceed 140 degrees. They drank the most amazing amount of fluid when down below and emerged at the end of their watches like limp rags into the comparative cool of

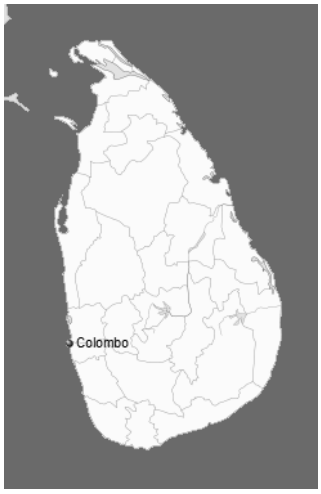
the deck area.....which was hot enough for the Chief Steward to fry an egg on the boiling steel deck!

Nearly all of the traffic transiting the Red Sea made a call at Aden - it had little attraction other than it's very efficient ship handling service and cheap bunker prices. It was the half-way point for many voyages from Europe bound for Australasia & India and much paper work to & from Head Office was handled. Scores of ships called every day and were swiftly refuelled and sent on their way. We were moored between a pair of buoys and a floating pipeline secured alongside; this was connected to the bunkering point. It was always left full of relatively clean diesel oil - mainly used for ships generators -and we would load most of our requirement for that fuel first. We would then switch to boiler fuel - supplied through the same pipeline but so thick it would only flow if heated - and top up our tanks as full as possible. Then we would top up with more diesel fuel thus leaving the pipeline ready for the next customer.

As our call was normally less than 12 hours we rarely went ashore but it was always a surprise to find that the small shopping arcade of Arab-run shops at Steamer Point included genuine agents for Rolex, Omega and the leading camera manufacturers all selling their wares at duty-free prices.

Finally, we set sail for Colombo - a few days run across the Indian Ocean and a welcome change from Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula.

Mooring at Colombo was between pairs of buoys - there was only one alongside berth which was reserved for passenger liners - in the large harbour and cargo was discharged by the local stevedores into lighters that were towed to and from the shore. Pilferage was a huge problem locally and the quartet of cadets worked round the clock trying to contain this. In addition, one of our motorised lifeboats was lowered and the cadets ran a ferry service to & from the shore.



The use of motor lifeboats was a sensitive subject in the Company at the time since an accident had occurred a year or two before when one of the passengers ships had an emergency call from a ship in the Mediterranean needing medical assistance. The sea was fairly rough but the lifeboat should have been able to cope with it - sadly the engine failed and the boat overturned and the six people on board - including the Second Officer and Doctor - were all lost. Subsequent enquiries revealed that although the boats engine had been started up regularly as part of weekly boat drill it had been some years since the boat had actually been in the water and the engine operated under load for any length of time. Ever since then, captains were under instruction to make use of motorboats in a realistic manner as frequently as possible .... a duty that largely fell on the cadets with two Indian seamen - or kalashis - as crew. Sometime this was purely for recreational purposes for which a ships lifeboat was not ideal but collecting sand from a beach - used for deck scrubbing -was a frequent task.

Inevitably, the main cargo loaded in Ceylon was tea for the Australian market where the British tradition of a cuppa was slavishly followed - fifty years later Australian is a noted exporter of tea!

After a stop of a few days we sailed for Fremantle in Western Australia - a run of about 11 days. We crossed the Equator after a few days and as we lost contact with the dreadful "Commercial Service of Radio Ceylon" - a station using very powerful equipment acquired from the military at the end of the war that had served the whole of South East Asia. This was replaced by the Australian stations in the accent we came to know so well.

During the crossing our weekly Fire and Boat Drills continued; crew and passengers assembled by their respective lifeboats and life jackets were checked. Our two motor-lifeboat engines were started and run for a few minutes and each week a different boat was "swung-out" into the lowering position to exercise the apparatus. On one occasion our emergency steering position on the stern was connected up for a few hours - this was in the open air and became unpleasantly hot in the absence of any shade. The position lacked a gyro compass and those at the wheel had to be on their toes whilst depending on the magnetic compass located there which could sometimes swing wildly if big corrections were made.

We arrived off Fremantle dawn where we were boarded by our pilot near Rottness Island - thoughtfully our agent had sent out with him the personal mail for the crew that had been accumulating for us - and docked in the Harbour. All the passengers and crew - including some individuals who rarely emerged from behind the scenes and that I had never seen before! - had a lightning inspection by the Port Health officer and the Customs checked our cabins for contraband and sealed up the duty-free stores.....until we left Australia again we could only buy a modest 25 cigarettes a day each at duty free prices so non-smokers suddenly became very popular if they were prepared to pass on their quota - at 7/8d for 200!

For the duration of our time in Australia the ship's official currency changed to Australian - for every pound sterling we received 25/- so suddenly we felt very rich. Strange to relate, just about the first thing many of the European part of the crew wanted to do with their Australian money was to visit a dockside milk bar and sink a pinta or two - for well over a month we had been drinking the rather strange powdered milk of the time and the genuine article was most welcome after it's curious taste.

At the time the Australian stevedores - or "waterside workers" as they preferred to be called - were notoriously unpredictable. Ships were frequently delayed by "gangs" walking off a ship at the slightest excuse and particularly when sailing time was approaching . They knew that this is was hugely expensive for the Company at the end of the working week - they refused to work at night, weekends or on Public Holidays - so delays had to be avoided at all costs to try to keep the ships on schedule since they only earn money when at sea.

Additional payments were frequently demanded almost on a blackmail basis - because the cargo was dirty or difficult to handle; I recall one dispute where "embarrassment money" was demanded to unload a consignment of lavatory pans - and this from a gang of huge sweaty men who were permitted 30 minutes paid time to close up the hatches at the end of a shift.....a task they normally accomplished within 10 minutes! One of the more scandalous incidents I remember was seeing the opening of a hugely expensive shower block demanded by the Union - on the day it was ceremoniously opened the labour force took advantage of the extra "clean-up time" allowance also negotiated to jump in their cars and go home ignoring the new shower block!

Whilst we discharged our cargo over several days new stocks of foodstuffs were loaded for the Chief Steward - really fresh fruit, crayfish, fresh milk and stocks of Australian type beer which was then something unknown outside the country and quickly proved a great favourite!

Our excursions ashore reminded us this was a foreign country as much as anywhere on the Continent .... roughly the same language was spoken but we were intrigued to find how the use of vast areas of public land meant many pleasant parks. wide roads, houses - mostly single storey -

widely spaced and the Swan River making an elegant backdrop on the journey to nearby Perth .... then as now, perhaps the most untypical Australian State Capital.

Great efforts were being made to enlarge the Australian population but the aim of doing so by largely importing those of British stock was fighting an uphill battle. The gates were opened to others from Europe - in particular Italy & Greece - and they were starting to make an impact on local communities.

One opportunity these "New Australians" - as they were called - seized upon was to open up the restaurant trade. Previously, one would seek in vain for premises open in the evening and all too often if one was found it was rather dire! One of the reasons for this were the strict controls on the sale of liquor which was largely confined to the rather dreary pubs - which totally lacked the attraction of the UK version since many were tiled-out like a public lavatory - and whose trade revolved around the "five o'clock swill" so called when workers headed for the pub after work at five and endeavoured to consume the maximum before closing time at six!

The new arrivals slowly convinced the old timers of the delights of an evening meal in a restaurant though frequently any liquor consumed was on a "Bring Your Own" basis on which a handsome corkage charge was made. Some flourished on serving ethnic foods from their country of origin but most soon realised there was a place for traditional Australian fare of mega-steaks almost on a barbecue scale.

It is sad to relate visiting Australia over the years since my first trip that "fast food" of American origin now dominates many high streets - but at least the liquor licensing laws are now on a more civilised basis.

Our next port of call was Adelaide in South Australia - a trip of a few days across the Great Australian Bight which was a notoriously rough reputation akin to the Bay of Biscay. The town seemed to be part of a Victorian timewarp with massive civic buildings that would not have looked out of place in Manchester. The small dock area was based in the river near a sandy beach so the opportunity was taken to lower one of our motor lifeboats and replenish our stock of sand used for scrubbing the decks - for the kalashis who accompanied us it was probably the only time they set foot on the Australian shore! We were fortunate to have the opportunity of visiting the inland area were a huge wine growing area had been established - one of the first in the country - where a large German -origin community had settled in the twenties.

Then a short run along the coast to Port Philip Heads were we entered the bay that led up to the port of Melbourne. Like all the Australian cities, a huge building programme was under way to expand the town and it's surroundings. Although we were some way from the town centre the massive tramway system covered the whole area and we were regular visitors to the town centre. However, we were fortunate to find a large branch of the Mission to Seamen on the waterfront which had a cinema with a free film show several nights a week - we were amused to find many of our Asian crew sitting in the audience and were shamed by the size of their voluntary contributions to the retiring collection which seemed to make our own somewhat modest.

Then the last leg of our outward voyage - a short trip to Sydney - were the magnificent harbour was a sight to behold with the famous Harbour Bridge or "Coathanger" visible from miles away. Sydney was a very cosmopolitan city also undergoing great change. Our berth was at the

curiously named Wooloomooloo Docks which has now found fame as the site of the famous Sydney Opera House.

At the time there was a huge contrast between the various Australian States and their capital cities - there was a huge distance between them and there was a flourishing trade in passenger ships running between the main cities of Fremantle, Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney & Brisbane with occasional services to smaller, intermediate towns and a few to the Northern Territory and Darwin. There were alternatives but flying was expensive, driving rather adventurous along mediocre road and rail travel had all the inconvenience of changing trains - which were frequently rather scruffy and normally in the middle of the night - whenever there was a change of gauge at State boundaries.

After a few days our discharging was complete and we commenced loading for the homeward voyage. The bulk of our cargo was made up of thousands of bales of wool and hundreds of sacks of grain - this was spread across the various holds and topped up with general cargo of various types. We carried many huge barrels of the then undistinguished Australian wine used for blending in Europe.

A new batch of passengers joined and I was "promoted" to being a regular watchkeeper after several trials sessions on the outward voyage. As the junior man I drew the short straw of being allocated the "12 to 4" watch and this entailed going to bed soon after dinner, being called at 2345 to be on the bridge at midnight half asleep, and coming off watch again at 0400 to try to get back to sleep.....but up again at 0800 if you wanted breakfast! Of course, back on watch at noon until 1600...a trying existence!

We retraced our steps via Melbourne & Adelaide to Fremantle with normally a stay of a few days in each place topping up the holds with assorted goods. As with all our calls occasionally cargo work was delayed by rain or other poor weather conditions and it was a relief to get back to sea as we were now homeward bound.

At Fremantle the Chief Engineer carefully calculated how much fuel to load to get us direct to Aden - no stop at Colombo en route - so we had a 14 day passage to cover the 5,000 miles. He was on a bonus for the most economic fuel purchase so we would probably arrive just about empty - but he did make sure our fresh water tanks were overflowing before we left!

We finally left Australia for this long passage and I faced the prospect of five or six weeks of broken sleep before we reached the U.K. One of my jobs as a watchkeeper was a patrol right around the ship at 0200 to check all was secure, all lights burning brightly and no sign of any smoke or fires! By this time, I was fairly confident of finding my way around the decks in the dark and rarely had to use my flashlight despite the many lumps and bumps in my path. On reaching the stern of the ship I walked around the crews' quarters but stumbled on something soft in the middle of the deck which went "Baah" rather loudly! There was a live sheep tied to the guard rails surrounded by a mass of green fodder....

I hastened back to the bridge to report my findings to the Second Officer who then patiently explained it was part of the contract with the Asian crew that when possible they would be supplied with a live sheep to celebrate the end of Ramadan which was due in a few days. On that day the unfortunate animal would be transformed into a superhot curry which certain honoured guests from the European crew - such as the Captain - would be invited to share. The Asians

would be released from all duties as far as possible - which became a rather adventurous day with the cadets taking it in turn to steer the ship and the junior engineers tending our boilers which left an impressive smokescreen in our rather wobbly wake!

As I reflected on this information I recalled that I have noticed some of the crew had been ashore on the dockside just our departure and returning with armfuls of fodder from harbour walls.

The celebrations duly commenced a few days later when the serang - our Indian bosun - announced the arrival of dawn using the age old method of when he could distinguish a black thread from a white thread when held at arm's length. Although no alcohol was involved it was a day of much jollification and tomfoolery with a little singing and dancing thrown in for good measure.

On arrival in Aden - a 14 day passage - we refuelled to capacity and set off for the Suez Can al.... this time a passage by night but it was a slick operation and our timing was such that on arrival at Suez we joined a convoy that was already moving, a brief anchorage in Bitter Lakes and into the Mediterranean with minimal delay. The change in air temperature was very marked - it was now early January - and we changed back into blue uniforms. Brief stops in Genoa and Marseilles and then direct to London Docks.

The fate of the European staff in those days at the end of a long trip was handled in a very casual and uncaring attitude by Head Office as until the ship arrived in London we had no idea what was going to happen to us such as a transfer, leave, temporary secondment or standing by on board.....our unfortunate Third Officer did not even know if he had leave to get married! However, I was given three weeks to rejoin the ship in London after it had made the usual coastal voyage around the Continent and East Coast Ports.....but subsequently cut short by a week to rejoin the ship in Hartlepool to replace a colleague given leave on compassionate grounds.

During our stay in Antwerp the ship had it's annual period in drydock whilst under examination by the insurance surveyor who carefully checked areas normally concealed from view. The cadets were given the filthy job of supervising the ranging of the anchors and cables along the bottom of the drydock for checking and painting - it was amazing the degree of corrosion found attributed to the low grade steel used in their construction during the wartime years when the best material was not available.

Our engineers carried our the hair-raising task of testing the safety valves on the boilers which had every one on tenterhooks until they released the excess steam pressure with a spectacular display of vapour and an earsplitting noise.

The surveyor took several days to complete his task and was given a cadet as an assistant to follow him around as we visited the more obscure areas of the ship - invariably filthy which had not seen the light of day since the ship was built. However, it was a great insight as to what happened behind the scenes!

A call at Hull saw us loading a new stock of mooring lines which were made nearby - at this time the industry was switching over to the vastly superior synthetic ropes made of nylon so this was probably one of the last consignments of fibre ropes supplied. Splicing ropes of this size - thicker than your wrist - was a Herculean task and gave an insight into the lifestyle of the old sailing ship seamen who had literally miles of such rope to care for.

On arrival in London I was despatched on two weeks leave - just the thing for mid-January!

Geoffrey Dunster OW 51-53