

FAREWELL TO PILOTAGE

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The month of June 1994 was momentous for me, as I became a Senior Citizen and retired from full-time employment.

On 1st July, the first day of my retirement, I received a card from Lou Mann, on behalf of my Gravesend colleagues, congratulating me on my departure from the pilotage service. On Lou's card was a picture of a Union Castle liner which evoked happy memories for Mary and me, as we had both sailed with Union Castle Line, I for eleven years and Mary for two. Fortunately, we did two memorable trips together to the South African Cape before I came ashore to take my Master's Certificate.

In January 1963, only weeks after entering the pilotage service of Trinity House at Cinque Ports, I was extremely lucky to survive being pulled out of the sea off Ramsgate during the "Sea of Ice" wintery. My fall from the ship, whilst disembarking at night, was due to defective ladder equipment. To be specific, the handrail stanchions had been attached to the unsecured bulwark steps instead of the ship's structure. To this day I can remember the boatman, Bob Caring, unable to haul me on board, lashing me to the boat's side and towing me into Ramsgate Harbour, thence to the hospital and bed via a hot bath in order to thaw my clothing.

There followed a relentless seven-year campaign by Gordon Greenham and myself, supported by our committee, M.P.'s and pilotage authorities and associations, to change the Board of Trade's reluctant attitude that "it did not wish rules that were too restrictive and not sufficiently flexible" to be introduced when dealing with the safety of pilot ladders. On 12th May 1970, Mr A. P. Costain (M.P. for Folkestone and Hythe) in a Ten-minute Rule Bill in Parliament, finally persuaded the Minister to accept rules that would be introduced in line with I.S.O. Regulations on pilot ladders, i.e. "... each stanchion should be rigidly secured to the ship's structure..."

In the sixties, when I was Honorary Social Secretary for the Cinque Ports Committee, for quite a few years I had the privilege of visiting retiring pilots to obtain a background for the Senior Pilot's speech to be given at their retirement parties. They would refer to their year in sail in a square-rigged vessel, which, before 1939, was a Trinity House requirement for pilotage acceptance.

Some of the potential pilots would seek a berth under a foreign flag. One served a year from January 1931 to March 1932 in the "Germaine", Le Havre to Haiti, 40 days out and back. However, a popular schooner was the "Waterwitch" commanded by Charles Deacon, who started life as a farm labourer. To qualify as a square-rigger it was necessary for the vessel to have a fore-top and a fidded fore topgallant mast. By special arrangement they used to sign on in normal officer capacities for £2.10

a month as against the going rate of £6 a month for a schooner A.B. I was always told by these retiring pilots that sometimes the going was good, but the worst part was the lice that came from the coal cargoes and infested the mattresses!

In 1939, the "Waterwitch", after lying for more than three years on the mud in Par Harbour, was sold to a group of four Estonian captains, who sailed her across the North Sea to Tallin, the capital of Estonia. She was the last British-owned square-rigged barquentine in the coastal trade that had been familiar to so many pilots and she remains part of our history.

These pilots sometimes related their wartime experiences when a "wrong stand-off" could mean their last duty as a result of a bomb or mine. I will mention just one war-time experience. A Cinque Ports pilot outward bound from Gravesend on the "Opeguon", September 1944,

"... tailed onto a coasting convoy. Missed the landing cutter at Newhaven. The destroyer escort said I would be taken off near the Solent. No luck, again off to Plymouth – no luck, so ended up in America. After being cleared the agent advanced me some dollars. Returning to the Mersey after being away a month, there was a letter waiting from Trinity House containing a bill for £14.5s.0d being a repayment of a loan made to me at New York under the "Lease Lend Act". Some Act ..."

One pilot was related to one of the eight pilots and six crew members of the crew of the Trinity House Pilot Cutter "Vigilant", who were killed when that vessel was mined whilst on duty at the Sunk Pilot Station in the 1914-18 War. I was also told that two pilots, captured by the enemy while in charge of an Admiralty vessel, were interned in Germany.

Another pilot showed me papers from the 21st Conference of the U.K.P.A. held in Deal in June 1904 under the President, Commander G. Cawley R.N.R. The paper showed that on one day following the Conference, three horse-drawn char-a-bancs took a party to Dover. At the Hotel Burlington, amongst the Dover pilots waiting were names that included W. Bussey, H. Carlton, I. Martin, H. Roberts, J. S. Martin and W. Howgego.

The report said that after the high tea, which included salmon, beef, tongue, chicken, ham and veal for starters, the President spoke in warm terms of the festivity, confirming my belief that the Cinque Ports pilots have always been extremely charitable and generous hosts. I noted that the final hours before returning to Deal were spent examining the new harbour works that were then in progress. Without fail those about to retire said how much they had enjoyed being pilots and how lucky they had been in taking part.

My first six months' training with Trinity House in 1961, was unremunerative, so the advent of becoming 'underdraft' in 1963 was welcomed by my family, as the empty coffers were swelled by the sum of twenty-three pounds per week for the next two years.

30 When our roster number became imminent for duty we would anxiously listen on the radio to 198 metres medium waveband to the E.T.A.s given by the cutter skipper and try to assess whether we would be involved in a "pyjama call-out". In the early hours, many wives acted as a taxi-service, often accompanied by sleeping children on the back seat. We would assemble at the Granville Dock Dumphead in Dover Harbour to be taken by cutter to the cruising cutter off Dungeness, replenishing the number of pilots awaiting ships from the West, to fourteen. Gravesend pilots would disembark their ships onto the Dungeness cruising cutter, until, weather permitting, they landed via Bates' motor boat onto Dungeness beach, attempting to avoid complete immersion! Whilst waiting to ship, the poker and solo schools took precedence, laced with many nautical stories about 'anchors that did not quite hold'.

In 1971, the move from cruising off Dungeness to the luxury of Folkestone Pilot Station changed our lives considerably. The introduction of traffic routing in the Dover Straits initially caused anxieties, but eventually made little change to our work. Whilst working on the Folkestone Pilots' Committee, I became involved in Deep Sea Pilotage and the setting-up of a helicopter service at the Western approaches to the Dover Straits.

Finally, in 1988, when pilotage with Trinity House ceased, we became employed by the Port of London Authority, which again introduced new challenges and conditions of service.

It has been a privilege to have worked with colleagues of a like mind and background and it has been wonderful to have completed an interesting career, spanning nearly fifty years at sea, one that has given me so much job satisfaction. I feel that I have been fortunate to experience the great changes in the working life of a pilot, some causing heartache and worry, others great joy and satisfaction. I have been very lucky.



A TRINITY HOUSE BOARDING CUTTER AT WORK