

# THE RESTORATION

• • • by Mike Igglesden • • •

After her restoration the *Seafarer* lived in the tidal basin in Dover Harbour, moored fore and aft to cables running down the wall to accommodate the 16 foot range of tide. Each low water she rested thankfully on the mud, enfolding old discarded lengths of chain, paint cans and other unsavoury rubbish and gently oozed out the water she had gained over the previous 12 hours. She was the focus of my life - probably to the detriment of formal education. This account of her voyage to Folkestone, described in a somewhat dramatic but factual manner, originally appeared in *Bygone Kent* in November 1998.

Two teenage boys are scrambling down the old iron runged ladder set into the slimy tidal basin wall. Upon reaching water level the first boy hooks the bow mooring line of his boat with his left foot and then pulls her towards him. After neatly stepping aboard he holds the line taut to enable his companions to follow his lead. From above, a small canvas bag descends, lowered on a light line by a third boy and is then neatly stowed into a locker built under the centre thwart. Boy number three then joins his mates in the 16ft ex-ship's boat, which had been converted into a Gunter rigged sloop, and was now the pride and joy of the eldest boy.

All his spare time over two years, with very limited skills and finances, had been spent restoring the wreck he had found in the back garden of a bombed out house in Dover in late 1944. He had endeavoured to put some of the counselling of Arthur Ransom, Percy Woodcock, Adlard Coles

and a dozen more of his nautical mentors into practice. Here he was, with his younger brother and a friend, off for a sail in the harbour - or such was their intention.

The tide was ebbing. The rudder shipped, the moorings slipped, then, since no wind was apparent under the lee of the dock walls, the two younger members of the crew pulled strongly on the oars, whilst the skipper commenced the preparations for the day's sail. The heavy steel dagger board was lifted off its stowed place on the floorboards and carefully lowered into its case. Then, in anticipation of a following breeze, a nail pushed through a hole halfway down the plate prevented it from falling into its fully down position. The mainsail's throat and peak halyards were



'Seafarer' in Dover Harbour

*'Seafarer' has just rounded Prince of Wales Pier*

bent on, the jib unstowed from under the little fore peak, hanked onto the forestay and the sheets set up.

Halfway down the length of the Prince of Wales Pier the boat was luffed into the light northerly. They hoisted the sails and the boat moved off onto a broad reach heading for the end of the pier. This was the point of sailing *Seafarer* really enjoyed. Her long Park Avenue boom (which never really fulfilled its designed function of giving the foot of the sail an aerofoil shape) holding out the large tie-dyed looking main, with the bamboo gaff falling to leeward just enough to match the angle of the boom. The capacity of Mum's copper had proved to be just a little too small to take the complete immersion of the mainsail in a rather belated tanning process. The hand sewn patch the boy had put in the full length of the luff (about 20 feet) bore tribute to the soundness or otherwise of the sail's material. Still it had until then served the boat well and given many hours of fun. By the time they cleared the end of the pier the breeze had picked up to a

beautiful 10 knots. Sunshine touched the little white horses and life was good.

Discussion arose as to just how to spend the day. A beat into the outer harbour? Or how about venturing outside? The closest they had previously been to venturing outside - an area often fraught with strong tides and large waves - was the fishing spot over the block ship sunk in the Western Entrance during the war. They decided to sail through this entrance and up to the Eastern Entrance, a distance of less than a nautical mile, then to return inside the harbour in time for an early tea. Food was never far from their thoughts. In order to clear the block ship, with its breaking waves around the jagged remaining superstructure, the boat headed for the end of the detached mole, which, together with the end of the Admiralty Pier, forms the Western Entrance to Dover Harbour. This was an adventure and one, which, half a century later, is still vivid in the skipper's mind. The huge granite blocks forming the mole towered above the boat, its skirt of seaweed swaying and lifting to the greeny

grey three foot swell. The sails suddenly became limp spreads of cloth as they came into the wind shadow. They filled again as the tide pushed the boat, destined to be for her last time, out into the Channel. Sea conditions were perfect for small boat sailing. The light northerly gave a relatively flat sea and good sailing breeze.

The irresponsibility of the exercise had not yet dawned upon any of them. There were no life jackets on board and the boat was ballasted with cast iron sash weights so any capsize would be a sinking. No one had been told of the intended destination of the voyage or of its probable duration. In fact, they should not even have been sailing in the harbour under those conditions, of course, but attitudes to safety were, to say the least, casual in 1948. Indeed the intended destination changed every few minutes. "Why don't we sail down to Folkestone? Its only six miles and we could be there and back in four hours. Twelve o'clock now so there is plenty of time." The boat was gybed and a course set for Folkestone.

The canvas bag, which had earlier been stowed in the ship's locker, was broken out and its contents of sandwiches and chocolate distributed. From about half a mile off shore the chalk outcrop, which is Shakespeare Cliff, The Warren (a marvellous stretch of untamed foreshore which had been their camping site a few days earlier), and other familiar landscapes slid past all looking so different and exciting from a seaward viewpoint. There were a couple of ships out to sea and a fishing boat putting out from Folkestone, but otherwise the seascape was their own. Absolutely beautiful - although nagging doubts had already begun to spoil the day for the oldest boy.

But nothing could spoil the incredible feeling of achievement and excitement upon entering Folkestone Harbour. The first landfall they had ever experienced, a foreign port! The breeze was just strong enough for the little boat to stem the ebbing tide into the outer harbour. By 1330 hours she had been made fast to the railings lining the stone steps, a stern line put out to an anchor, and the crew, after giving their ship a harbour stow, climbed ashore to 'explore' the town.

That they travelled by bus or bicycle at least once a week during the summer months from Dover to the swimming pool below the Folkestone Leas, and that they knew this town almost as well as their own, did not diminish to any extent this excitable pleasure.

"We will just have time to check on any interesting boats in the inner harbour, buy an ice cream and then we must set off home again." By 1415 hours these aims were accomplished and they were back at the steps. Mud patches were appearing on the harbour floor. Mooring lines and chains, which had spent the previous hours restlessly see-sawing narrow trenches in the mud, were now visible and still. All the fishing boats were lolling to port or starboard and little streams of brown water were cutting steep sided channels towards the harbour mouth. *Seafarer* was just afloat, but it was obvious that she was to be in her present berth until the beginning of the next flood tide.

What to do? Go home on the bus! The Harbour Master would have to be found to obtain permission for the boat to be moved to a more suitable berth for an overnight stay. Contact with officialdom was in itself somewhat of a deterrent, with the strong possibility of at least a reprimand for their exploits. There was also the probability of a weather change from the light to moderate

conditions to that of a more boisterous nature, not unusual in the English Channel.

The advice of an 'old' fisherman (he probably was at least 40) who was leaning on the railings and had been regarding the boys with a somewhat whimsical smile was sought. "She'll be afloat again in a couple of hours. Weather will hold until tomorrow morning. You will have a foul tide up to Dover. Take you three hours in this breeze which is getting round to more of a south-easter."

Discussion arose. "Lucky with the wind shift. If we leave at 1530 hours we should be home by 1830 hours. Let's do that." None of the boys had telephones at home and, even if they had, it was doubtful if a call would have been made. "With some luck we'll be back before we are missed."

By 1515 hours, punting with the oars, rowing and paddling slowly, ever so slowly, *Seafarer* eased towards the harbour mouth. The fishing boats on their moorings were still held hard and fast in the black mud. The mud also held hard and fast to the oars and on the boy's arms and hands as they pulled themselves along any convenient mooring line that would help their progress. The dagger board was lowered about 50 yards from the entrance and sail was made. Some difficulty in clearing the moles against tide and wind was experienced, but by about 1545 hours they were in the open sea heading for Dover.

By keeping inshore it was hoped the adverse tide of about 2 knots would be minimised, and with a 10 knot south-easter blowing they could just lay their course on starboard tack. This is a very rock strewn foreshore and the swell of

about four feet capped by two foot waves made for exciting sailing for the inexperienced. Every now and then a cheeky wave would slop aboard, some of which was returned by means of a large biscuit tin bailer that was scraped along the floorboards as the boat rolled and the water sloshed towards the bailer boy.

In spite of the warm sunshine they were all getting cold. None wore waterproof clothing and their lumber jackets and long grey school trousers were by now very wet. The mood aboard was apprehensive but cheerful. Although keeping well out from the surf line, every once in a while a larger wave would rear up and carry the boat a few yards towards the beach. On each of these occasions the skipper found himself gripping more firmly the ash axe handle, which he had selected for its pleasing shape as much as for its strength, when making up the boat's tiller. Concern for the safety of his young crew, for whom he rightly felt responsible, and, of course, the fate of his beloved boat, was rising rapidly. It would only take the shipping of one of those extra menacing waves to spell the end of the voyage and, possibly, the end of them all. He considered running through the surf and attempting a landing on the steep bank of stones and pebbles of Shakespeare beach. The boat would be lost, of course, but since they could all swim well enough to probably survive such a landing, it was a real option. Now was the time to make the decision.

The towering grey wall of the Admiralty Pier was looming up three quarters of a mile ahead. The roar and suck of the pounding waves on the beach could now be clearly heard. To make the harbour entrance a tack would have to be made out to sea for about half a mile and then the Western Entrance, with its hazard of the block ship would be visible. "Ready about." The boat was swung

onto port tack and headed away from the beach, her motion changing as her new course took her more squarely into the waves. The wind had increased and *Seafarer* was over canvassed. They had never ever attempted to reef down whilst sailing, let alone in these conditions. The long overhanging boom touched the wave tops to leeward more and more often as the sheet was eased to relieve the wind pressure on the mainsail. Should have reefed an hour ago, too difficult now. To hand in the jib would result in the boat having too little drive to punch through this head sea. The skipper could not hide his concern, which, anyhow had been shared by his shivering crew for half an hour now. It was two and a half hours since they had left the safety of Folkestone and the wrong decision to sail had long ago been uppermost in their minds.

The design of the boat with its narrow forward sections and straight stem gave little reserve buoyancy, causing her to shovel into the waves, some of which were breaking over the starboard bow. Bailing was now continuous. The boy not bailing was sitting out on the windward gunwale using the tail end of the lee jib sheet for support. The skipper, due to the short length of the tiller, was unable to do likewise. He was occupied in trying to ease the boat over the most menacing waves and control the mainsheet to keep the boat moving towards their immediate goal - to clear the Admiralty Pier and enter the Western Entrance. Time dragged on. Each minute took at least an hour to pass. The



*Shakespeare Beach*

next go about would be critical. Look for a flat spot between the waves. "Ready about." *Seafarer* with her long straight keel always took an age to respond. Very slowly she came into the wind. A wave smacked her port bow and her swing onto the other tack was aborted. She gathered sternway. The boy on the helm pushed the tiller away from him towards the port side of the boat. The next wave struck the bow head on and pushed her further astern. "Back the jib!" She swung round and was safely on her new course heading for the entrance.

What relief. Surely now we will make it. Three hundred yards from the entrance the boat's motion changed as the waves were now broadside on. The full force of the south-west setting tide was now in evidence and was running down both sides of the detached mole at two and a half knots and pouring out of the entrance. Impossible to make it through the gap without fouling the block ship. "We will have to sail along the outside of the mole and come in at the other end." The respite from bailing which had been enjoyed since the last change of course was short-lived. Fear gripped the crew. The skipper was the

calmest of the three since he had a job on hand which called for complete concentration. This was the first time in his short life he had been really frightened - even the worst part of the London blitz had not been this bad. Then it had been the luck of the draw. Now he had a chance to control his destiny, and that of his terrified crew. Backs and arms were in agonising pain from the incessant bailing. The sounds of sobbing became apparent. Bail, bail, bail. An endless succession of white capped seething waves came roaring down from windward, passing under the boat to be rebuffed with a solid 'womp' by the detached mole, which was now only fifty yards down to leeward. The sea from the resulting back surge was very confused. Broken water, grey green peaks and troughs of unpredictable size and shape rising up from nowhere and cascading back into the valleys, occasionally tumbling across the leeward gunwale into the boat. The outboard end of the boom was now continuously in the water with the sail shuddering and cracking as it was eased off to relieve the overpowered craft.

A jumble of thoughts surged through the young skipper's mind. He had roved a new main halyard a couple of weeks ago but most of the other gear was definitely suspect. It would have been nice to have some money to spend. Didn't matter now. Surely the people fishing on the mole, watching three boys about to drown, would run to the Harbour Control people and get help? No. One even waved to them. If we capsized would the sash weights and the bags of shingle ballast fall out of the boat? If this were to happen it would at least give the boat enough buoyancy to provide some support until help arrived. If it arrived. Bail, bail, bail. Later in life the skipper was to realise that here was a classic situation confirming the old adage that the world's

most efficient bilge pump was a frightened boy with a bucket - but in this case a biscuit tin.

The bilges were now a foot deep in the sloshing cold water and the floorboards were responding by lifting and surging around, substantially hindering the efforts of the boys to fight the losing battle to keep the sea outside the boat. With aching backs and blanked minds, where survival was the only thought, progress towards the Eastern Entrance was hardly noticed and seemed of little consequence. Eyes stinging with salt, the skipper made out the eastern end of the mole. "We just have to clear that and then we are safe." Wind and tide then controlled their destiny and the little boat was swept through the entrance, round under the lee of the mole and within a few seconds was in calm waters. An indescribable mixture of feelings - joy, remorse, exaltation, thankfulness and relief then engulfed the exhausted boys. Memory is able to recall those feelings, and savour them, completely undiminished, even after the passing of more than fifty years.

Inside the harbour the citizens of Dover, were enjoying a beautiful summer evening. A mixed fleet of dinghies was engaged in a round the harbour race. People were fishing from rowing boats. In the distance could be seen deckchairs on the beach and brave souls were swimming and diving. *Seafarer* was not sailed back to the tidal basin. The closest possible place to leave her was on a groyne outside the submarine pens. They moored her as best they could, allowing for a tide range of about 16 feet. Then, a group of wet, shivering and much shaken boys had to face both a two mile walk home and the music to follow. Next morning *Seafarer* had sunk. All loose gear, floorboards, rudder, boom, oars were gone. Not a total wreck but...