

All at Sea – the Life of George Sutcliffe

Part II - In Coastal Waters

Peter W Sherred

The Ariel was a GPO cable ship based in Dover which worked on telephone cables around the UK up to the edge of the continental shelf. She spent a total of six months of the year tied up in Dover in the Eastern Docks near the submarine pens and was never away for more than four weeks at a time. Much work was undertaken around the coast of Scotland and in the Shetlands and Orkneys. In the two years George was on the Ariel one of the things he found most interesting was laying a new cable and landing the shore end. He remembers well one such job when Ariel was engaged in renewing the telephone link for the monks on Caldy Island near Tenby in South Wales. After two years, in 1965, he decided to try the cross-channel ferries which, of course, he had seen operating at close hand in the port.

George joined British Railways, Southern Region Ferries in 1965. The first ship he was sent to was the Maid of Kent where he was told he was joining as 'Makee Learn 2nd Officer'. This was new to him as when deep sea he was accustomed to being



Captain George Sutcliffe

appointed to a ship in a rank and expected to get on with it. He soon realised the ferries had set routines, which had been established over the years, that had to be learned if the job was to go smoothly. He was most fortunate in not being laid off at the end of the summer season and was offered a contract within a year or two. Subsequently, he suffered an accident on the

Normania during discharge in Dover when the ramp that led up to the upper car deck was lowered and a supporting leg came down on his toe! The captain seeing his bloodstained sock immediately said he was going to call an ambulance. George was taken to casualty, which at that time was in the Royal Victoria Hospital in Dover, where a doctor patched him up. He was off for a week or two before the railway doctor passed him fit for work with the proviso he wore sandals as the dressing on his toe would not fit in a shoe.

The overriding sensation of his time as 2nd Officer on the ferries was one of a feeling of freedom. Once clear of the port the Master tended to disappear and control was his. This contrasted with deep sea where, once in restricted waters, there was constant supervision or even a pilot on board. Friends who were still deep sea used to say to George "don't you find it boring going back and forth across the ditch"? His reply was, "it is a lot less boring than a four-hour watch in mid ocean". Due to his fortunate timing in joining the



Ariel

company, he quickly found himself promoted to 1st Officer when he was able to develop his abilities as a ship handler which he enjoyed, whatever the weather. The company policy was for Masters to encourage their 1st Officers to develop their expertise in weather conditions appropriate to their level of experience. When he himself was Master he made it a practice to do all the berthing and unberthing the first-round trip and, despite the fact he loved doing it himself, letting the 1st Officer do the second round trip. This practice made the transition from 1st Officer to Master far less traumatic than it might have otherwise been.

George's fondest memories as 1st Officer relate to his time on the *Maid of Orleans*. The Master was a man who did not particularly enjoy ship handling and in consequence let him do the lot, regardless of the weather. George recalls the Master did have some lovely sayings or advice. When George asked him how to make no 14 berth in Boulogne in a south westerly gale the reply was "drive her in, hit her hard and tie her up while she is still stunned"! Ship handling required a good relationship with the engineers being able to rely on them to put the steam in to pull the ship up sharpish when needed. George says "We very much depended on one another". For George the *Maid of Orleans* was a beautiful ship to handle and contrasted with the *St Patrick* which rather

lived up to her nickname among the Masters of The Black Pig as she tended to have a mind of her own!

Often relieving Masters for their annual leave meant George sometimes found himself spending a fortnight on a steam ship with bow rudder and telegraph control of the engines followed by a fortnight on a motor ship with bow thrusters and bridge combinator control of variable pitch propellers. Quite different techniques but variety was the spice of life. During his time with British Railways George also served on the *Dover* and in the autumn of 1973 had just been dropped back to 1st Officer on the *Anderida* for the winter season when a request came from Newhaven for a Master with experience to go down there to give some relief to the Masters of the newly arrived *Senlac*. George volunteered. It was another very interesting experience for him. Until he had sufficient navigations in Newhaven to obtain his pilotage exemption he had a 1st Officer with him who had obtained his pilot's licence. Newhaven was steeped in traditional ways to a far greater degree than Dover which had benefitted from a large influx of officers from deep sea. While on the Newhaven to Dieppe run he introduced a revolutionary manoeuvre with *Senlac* for exiting Dieppe which saved the awkward work of rigging swinging wires and saved time and fuel. When leaving Dieppe he eased the ferry out of the berth sideways, using bow thrust and



Maid of Orleans



Vortigern

propellers, then swung her through 90 degrees to exit the port.

On arrival back from Newhaven in 1975 George was fortunate again to be relieving the regular Master of the Maid of Orleans when she did her last trip. Having sailed from Dover in atrocious conditions the 'Maid' arrived back with the wind at gale force and the seas off the western entrance far too rough to swing outside and enter there. So, entering the eastern entrance George swung the 'Maid' just inside the harbour and proceeded to cross the harbour stern first around the Prince of Wales Pier into no1 berth Admiralty Pier. Five retired Masters and the Marine Superintendent who were on the bridge with George for the last trip were impressed with the 'Maid's' handling capabilities. A few days later George took the 'Maid' to Newhaven from where she was taken to Spain for breaking. It was about this period he was relieving a Master on the Vortigern. As the ferry approached Boulogne, Captain John Arthur was on the bridge. It had always been George's policy to carry on giving orders until the Master said he had the control and he continued to do so on this occasion. When he had given 'stand by' and directed the quartermaster to bring the ferry round for entry Captain Arthur said to George "do you want to take her in"? "Certainly sir" George replied, adding that he had handled the ship before with the B crew Master and had taken her in and out of Boulogne on many occasions. George was responsible for the rest of the handling that day and the next morning Captain Arthur announced he had arranged with the staff office for George to remain with him for formal training as Master and he remained as D crew Master. When Captain Arthur passed George out he put in his letter to the Marine Superintendent



St Anselm

"Captain Sutcliffe has been fortunate enough to have experienced gale force winds during his training". It was possibly because of this time with him that Captain Arthur asked for George to join the St Anselm as one of his team of Masters when she came in 1980.

Joining as E crew Master by the time he retired 10 years later he had spent a year as the Senior Master. He recalls one memorable occasion when, having arrived in Dover one evening, a dispute of some sort at the Eastern Docks meant only cars and foot passengers were allowed off but freight vehicles were kept on board. He was told to anchor in the harbour until the matter was resolved but he asked permission to take the ship to Folkestone for discharge of the freight. The duty manager said that it was a good idea but the ship had never been to Folkestone however he saw the logic and agreed. The ferry was able to berth in Folkestone although it had to be held at a slight angle to the ramp as she was wider than the ships it had been built to take. George was able to discharge the very grateful drivers.

Throughout the ten years he was on the St Anselm he did not serve on any other vessel apart from the St David which was operational for a few months 1982/1983 while St Anselm was away having her accommodation extended aft. He took the St David on her first trip to Calais. In about December 1989 during an evening shift

George informed the staff office of his intention to retire on his 60th birthday the following August, 1990. When he told Mary on arrival home the next morning her reaction was "What have you done? What have you bent"? He still enjoyed ship handling and working with people but odd niggles were beginning to set in, not least among them the job, in his opinion, being increasingly run by accountants. Once again good fortune shone upon him as, by retiring early, Mary and George had sixteen good retirement years together before she died being taken from him by cancer in 2006. Sadly, and far too young, George's daughter Melanie died in 2016.

During his time at sea, and since, there were and have been enormous changes. Gone are the leisurely times in port, while on the deep-sea routes, discharging and loading; container ships now being in port only a matter of hours dealing with many more tons of cargo than was previously handled in a week. While very good for the ship owners it is very stressful for crews who, for months on end, have little or no opportunity to come ashore. Work patterns on the cross-channel ships have also changed to a degree George would no longer recognise. During his service there were three crews working twelve hours on twenty-four hours off with a further crew to cover annual leave. Additionally, all the crews were locally recruited so people knew each other and were able to form



Duquesa, Houlder Bros

social groups ashore. Today crews are recruited from all over the country and spend a whole week or more on board with the result that when they disembark all connection with the job is lost. George realises that in the present day it is all down to 'the bottom line' and profit is necessary if companies are to survive but he feels it is a great shame that it has to be paid for at the expense of those on the front line. "But," says George, "I am just an old bloke who is more than grateful that my career spanned the good years at sea which I can say I thoroughly enjoyed".

On shore George and Mary sent their children, when young, to Sunday school at St Martin's Church in Maxton where Mary was also confirmed. George and Mary both became increasingly involved with the church. This caused George, over time, to commit his life to Christ's church. He enrolled for a correspondence course to become a Reader in the Church of England taking two years to complete the training before being authorised Reader officially in a service at Canterbury Cathedral. This was an office in which he was active for forty years at St Martin's Church and then St Margaret of Antioch Church in St Margaret's at Cliffe until 2010 when, at the age of eighty, he decided to retire. The only services he takes now are the funerals of ex colleagues which he does not mind at all for as he says, "when you have known the person it is much easier to make the service relevant and personal".



Langton Grange, Houlder Bros