

TURNING THE SCREW
- An engineering apprenticeship with the New Zealand Shipping Company -
by ConRod*

Learning The Theory

TAKE a cross section of engineers in the Merchant Navy and most would feature the word '–side' in their place of birth – Merseyside, Clydeside, Tyneside, Wearside. All would have been time-served men, hardened by five year's toil in the shipyards, following a traditional route at the end of their apprenticeships into the MN.

In the Fifties, the Shipping Federation, in which The New Zealand Shipping Company was a major player, devised an alternative route to a career in the Merchant Navy as a ship's engineer. It was a 4½-year course based on two years studying for the Ordinary National Diploma in Marine Engineering, an 18-month period at sea, and then a final year in the shipyards. Let's be fair. It was aimed at lads who had a few O' levels under their belts and who at 16, had slightly more scholarship than shipyard savvy.

I saw details of the scheme from a friend at school just as I was rejecting the advice of career masters into traditional pathways such as banking, insurance, or government, both local and national. Simply reading the list of participating companies – NZS, British India, Blue Funnel, Shaw Savill and Albion, Port Line, Union Castle – set one's mind racing to far off shores. Not that I was at all engineering-orientated although I could mend a puncture and change the fixed wheel on my Raleigh Lenton bike pretty smartly. My only connection with any shipyard was a huge model of a dockside crane I built out of my Dad's Meccano. For weeks afterwards, I had calloused fingertips from its nuts and bolts.

For no reason in particular, other than it was the other side of the world, I applied to the NZS, was accepted and in September 1956, entered Kingston Technical College as it was then, Kingston Uni as it is now, on a two-year course. There were about 30 other lads on the course from much the same background – middle-English Southerners from both technical colleges or grammar schools. You could usually tell the lads from a technical background because they had built, or were in the process of rebuilding, their own motorbikes which they maintained and fully serviced.

At the end of the first year of study, we were scheduled to spend the vacation 'on the spanners' in a shipyard, and I was assigned to John Brown's Shipyard at Clydebank. I went to the library and searched the map for Clydebank and found it was almost in the Hebrides, just north west of Glasgow. It's a usual Southern misconception, I'm afraid. I was to learn there's as much land north of Glasgow as South, so I suppose you could think of the Clyde as being middle-Britain.

I and a colleague voyaged North for what seemed like days and prepared to live in a Scots tenement for two months. We had already lived in digs in leafy Surrey for a year, so by now, were accustomed to living away from home. Little had equipped us for tenement life in Clydebank.

We shared the one room; Dave in a bed, I in the closed-in cupboard that's a trademark of these tenements. We ate the same repetitive meal of sausage meat and chips for weeks before either of us plucked up enough courage to complain. Very English, that! The chips,

by the way, were made a week at a time and stored in the bath. The final straw that led us to complain was that every meal time, the landlady blasted music at us through a loudspeaker system over which we had no control. I'll tell you, even today, 50 years later, hearing '*Last train to San Fernando*' brings me out in a cold sweat. After four weeks, I got Dave's sheets, he got mine and the landlady went broody at our ingratitude. It didn't help that following our weekly Friday payment to her, her son's gleaming sports car sported some new knick-knack on the Saturday. Coincidence maybe; galling, certainly.

Shipyard life was another eye-opener. First, it took about a month to acclimatise to the bone-cracking cold which was Scotland's summer. I wore string vests, shirts, jumpers, combat jacket and boots – sensing the multi layer protection tactic well ahead of my time – and I still froze. Meanwhile the Clydesiders worked in shirtsleeves. Second, it took two months to decipher the language. Just as we were becoming fluent, we came home and so completely had we adopted the glottal stop, our parents could not understand us.

We were both initially assigned to journeymen working in the steam turbine shop. I was assigned to Wully (English: William) whose first instruction to me, standing over and pointing to, a large lump of metal was "Loss that bairn". "Bairn" I knew from Dr Findlay's Casebook and such was "baby". "Loss" I supposed was the same as in English. But lose the baby didn't make sense. It turned out after much frustration on his part, grabbing a file and working furiously on a polished metal surface was "Lose that bearing." In other words, file the surface of the metal below any adjoining surface.

I have nothing but praise for Wully and other Clydesiders for the friendly way they welcomed us and began to assimilate what to them, might just as well have been aliens from outer space. We didn't know one end of a spanner from the other, one part of an engine from another; hadn't a clue about shipyard life and couldn't speak the language; we were hopeless. So for the first few weeks, we fetched and carried, gradually absorbing the Brown's or Broons as it was known, lingua franca both in speech and carriage.

After work hours – 7.00am to 4pm – we dragged ourselves back to the lodgings, *Last Train to San Fernando*, and the inevitable patties of sausage meat. As you might expect, as we were so unexposed to this degree of physical work, we found it difficult to talk, let alone find our way back to the digs. Gradually we acclimatised and hardened.

Weekends were spent sleeping or round at the local café. Even in those days, Clydebank had a vibrant café society – downing Irn Bru, mutton pie and mushy peas and listening to Peggy Lee's '*You give me fever*' on the jukebox. Don't tell me sophistication wasn't alive and well in Simeone's café on the corner of Whitecrook St. Intellectual debate? I should say so. It was the time of Elvis and the great Bill Haley's film of '*Rock around the clock*' which produced a riot in the local cinema with chairs being ripped out and the polis (English translation: police) being called in.

One weekend Dave, I and another Thamesider-cadet Barry, indentured to British India and working at pump makers, Dawson and Downey, felt the need to get away from the sophisticated Clydebank scene. So we hopped a train to Lossiemouth, a jewel on the Moray Firth, further 'up' Scotland. We didn't realise how much further it was 'up' Scotland it was until we arrived there exhausted and cold the next morning; hence my earlier remarks about Glasgow being middle-Britain.

I had spent a fortnight camping there a few years earlier and wanted to renew old acquaintances. Besides being the birthplace of Ramsey MacDonald, Lossie's claim to fame is an RAF station and the best fish-and-chip shop in the world. It has what must be the longest silver sand beach in the northern hemisphere; if only it were 600 miles further south. With no place to stay, I suggested we kip in the cave beneath the lighthouse. A fire, a few sausages later, and using the tramp's old trick of wrapping our bodies in newspapers, we settled down for the night. I truly believe that even the standard British caveman would not have lasted more than a week in those mid-summer temperatures! The wind at Lossiemouth comes straight from the Urals, the sea temperature would match the Barents Sea and dawn comes at 3.00 am. The weekend made even the heady ambience of Clydebank look inviting.

The end of September saw us leave Clydebank to go back at Kingston for our final second year. But now we were experienced shipyard workers, tempered in the fires of Clydebank, Wallsend or wherever; not naive middle class wanna-bes direct from the school playing fields. It showed. I guess we developed a certain swagger and aspired to what were now fundamental possessions such as cars and motorbikes. You have to remember in those days, these vehicles of release and passion were owned only by those with wealth or breeding or those with an obsessive technical bent who fashioned racing cars from old Austin Sevens or who restored Rudge TT roadsters.

A relatively uneventful second year led to a second secondment in the August/September to Clydebank.

This time for the journey north, Dave and I clubbed together to buy a car. We split its £25 cost between us and became the proud owners of a 1927 Austin Seven Ruby painted in shed green. Dave worked on the car and drove it from the Thames Valley to Clydebank in one go. I had not yet learned to drive so Dave took the helm for the whole 36 non-stop hours journey. This was pre-Mway although I think the Lancaster Bypass had just been finished.

One would best describe the car as reliable though fundamental. The passenger worked the windscreen wipers mechanically by wagging a tiny lever up in the roof line. The fuel gauge was a dip-stick modelled on a draughtsman's Tee square. To check the fuel level, you parked the car on a flat spot, lifted the bonnet, took off the filler cap – the tank was high up behind the engine to gravity feed the carburettor – plunged in the Tee-square and took a reading. Primitive yet accurate. We reckoned the car's cruising speed was 30 mph; at this speed it consumed 30miles/gallon. Pulling up Shap behind a groaning Scammell or Foden was not an experience I would like to repeat. The car had no heating except anything flowing backwards from the engine: obviously motorists were not wimps in 1927. And it does get cold at the top of Shap Fell.

The car became quite a feature of the Clydebank scene, howling round corners at 15 mph with both driver and passenger sitting nonchalantly with their elbows out through the window clamped against the door to hold themselves upright. That was as well as jamming feet and legs against the hump of the gearbox. The little green car was quite a crowd puller for two young men-about-town. Each weekend it took us deep into the Highlands and Lochs and all told, covered about 4,000 miles before it finally coughed its last.

This second time in the yards, we knew the ropes, renewed old friendships and gradually made sense of ship construction. We were moved from department to department to gain

experience. A couple of weeks in the foundry followed a spell in the copper shop and a stint in the patternmakers. It was all coming together.

Mind you, catching the tram to work having had no breakfast at a pitch black 6.30am, climbing to the top deck and meeting a solid wall of Capstan ciggie smoke, quite made your eyes water. Even now, I can see those rickety trams swaying and rolling their way down the centre of the Dumbarton road, and in the half gloom of the early morning, remember the whole top deck full of blue, oily overalls, traditional bonnets (English translation: flat caps) with each wearer smoking a Capstan and reading the Daily Record. We used to work for what seemed like half a day, look at the clock, and see it was just squeezed past nine.

In its day, John Brown's was the embodiment of heavy marine engineering. It was rightly world-renowned for its expertise and we worked on everything from gas turbines for the British colonies to diesel engines and steam turbines for Brown's order book. At various times in our secondment to the yard, we worked on the NZS's first tankers, the SS Lincoln and SS Kent; the latter was a ship I was to become more familiar with after completing my apprenticeship. I guess after spending several months working in its bowels in general, and in its stripping pump room in particular, I can claim a certain intimacy with that vessel.

For this episode at Brown's, Dave and I were billeted at Scotstoun, about half way between Clydebank and Glasgow. Having re-discovered our shipyard stamina, as it were, we were able to make more trips into Glasgow. The local cinema, just the other side of Partick, where seats were either 3d or 6d, proved irresistible.

Besides the trams, two bus companies ran from Clydebank into Glasgow – the red SMT line and the green and yellow Corporation buses. I remember the SMT conductors, who would have all been ex-National Service men, affected their white uniform caps in a Guards-style with the peak almost completely shading the eyes and bits of cardboard holding the body of the cap in a moulding that was the trademark of the owner. Such was the blinkering effect of these dropped peaks, that if the conductors wanted to look at anything above chest height, they had to rock their whole body backwards from the waist. It was a cap style I was to later try to copy with my NZS-issue although frankly, it always looked more like those high-crowned jobs favoured by the Russian army.

Anyway, these bus crews had to have some wager on the time they could take to get from Brown's shipyard into the central depot in Glasgow's Bothwell Street. Many a time I've done the journey without stopping and with almost complete disregard for life and limb - passengers that is. The technique, in lying in wait for one of these dashing vehicles at the bus stop, was to adopt a crouching stance facing towards Glasgow. This was later copied by most 10,000 m runners, although we had to look over our shoulders. Once the bus was spotted approaching, it became rather like a relay race. You started running so your peak speed coincided with the bus passing. You then flung yourself at the rails on the bus deck and willing hands dragged you on board. I know what it was like being rescued from the Titanic. On rushed the bus, its pace unbroken, its momentum undisturbed with passengers cheering and hanging on for dear life. Great days.

Looking back over these two prequels to the Great Rakaia Trip, I am struck by how we assimilated into a completely different culture and were welcomed by the Clydesiders. Very often we were invited home for a meal and chat which we always looked forward to. I

don't suppose we were as work-efficient as the true Brown's apprentice but that never seemed to bother the journeymen who gave of their expertise without hesitation.

Then one September, in the usual monthly pay letter, there was a note from the NZS General Manager asking me to report to Gladstone Dock to board M.V. Rakaia and enclosing a list of clothing and kit I might need.

I still have a warm feeling regarding my stays in John Brown's and especially the complete year we spent there, after the Rakaia, at the end of our apprenticeship. But more of that later.

Theory Into Practice – M.V. RAKAIA – September 1958 to February 1959

I joined the Rakaia in September 1958 in Gladstone Dock, a teenager resplendent in my Cadet uniform purchased the week before from a marine chandlers in Aldgate, East London. Amongst the kit packed into my blue Globetrotter suitcase – now, I'm told, a much sought after and high-status item of luggage – was a single-breasted, Burberry-style, Raincoat, blue (RN pattern without belt), a black cummerbund, six stiff white collars, one white Duck Uniform (RN pattern) and one housewife. What was missing from the 'Outfit Required' list kindly supplied to its apprentices by the New Zealand Shipping Company from 138 Leadenhall Street was one plain strong leather belt and Green River Sheath knife, oilskin and southwester, and rubber sea boots and stockings.

I was different. The mauve bands across the three buttons of my shoulder straps showed I was an engineer cadet quite distinct from the plain three buttons of the deck cadets usually trained on the Rakaia. It turned out that colleagues Dave, Terry and I we were the first engineer cadets on the Rakaia and, as far as the deckies were concerned, were very rare birds indeed.

Gladstone Dock, indeed Liverpool, was my first experience of a working dockyard. In my mind's eye, I fully expected the rows of derricks and warehouses and believed the Rakaia would be something of the shape, size and power of the Ark Royal. After all, if New Zealand was our ultimate destination, you wouldn't try to go that far in something that appeared to be in the same league as a Salter's Steamer, the big boats on my part of the Thames, would you?

When I first saw the fully loaded Rakaia in Gladstone Dock, I thought she was smaller than a Thames steamer and must be the tug not the ship proper. By what leap of faith, I thought will I commit myself to this minnow to safely transport me, 12,000 miles to a country, which by legend had more sheep than people. Compared with all other cargo vessels around her, she was tiny but I must say her lines had a rakish air. Even the gang plank inclined down.

The next couple of days, settling in and finding our way around the ship, were one of confused amusement. Not only had we land-lubbers to cope with the uniformed traditions of cadet ships but there was also the newness of everything, the language, and the interaction with a bunch of cadets who had 'been there, done that' and who knew the ropes and rhythm of shipboard life. Luckily there were also a bunch of first trippers who were going through the same learning curve as us.

So being novices, albeit with a couple of years on other first trippers, we accepted the early morning scrubbing of corridors, added to the complicated waking-up instructions scrawled on the school-room green board, and unravelled the pattern of 'what part of what uniform to wear when'.

The engine room of course was something else. Although we had been trained in the theory of marine engineering and had spent a two-month secondment in John Brown's shipyards, I don't think anything prepared us for the size, smell, light and noise of a fully breathing engine-room at rest. At this stage, still in port, the main racket came from the couple of Ruston diesel gennies providing heat, light and power to the ship and its cargo derricks. The main engine, down the centre of the engine room and three stories high, was silent, clean and polished.



Sept 1958: Sporting the latest in engine-room haut couture, Rakaia's first engineer cadets build up the power in its B&W Big-Eight with surgical precision. The world holds its breath...

Just a technical point here. Each cylinder of the Rakaia's Burmeister and Wain eight-cylinder diesel engine had three pistons. I used know the precise measurements of the piston to a thousandth of an inch but now, 40 years later, I guess each was at least six feet across and weighed a couple of tonnes. We were introduced and assigned to the engineer officers who if the truth be known, were bemused by the appearance of us Home Counties' lads. With the second engineer being a Kiwi, third, four and sixth engineers being Scots and the eighth a Scouser, the first few days for us were reduced to blank looks, writing in notebooks and general helplessness. I identify with early British explorers discovering new races of people deep in the jungle; you can see them, you can hear them, but I'm dammed if you can understand them.

Communication it wasn't. But we had gone through the same process in Clydebank and at least our ears were accustomed to a Scots accent but not one attenuated by the engine room clatter. Today, it is interesting to remember how quickly we got accustomed to lip reading, body language and speaking to someone with your mouth about three centimetres from their ear.

The eye opener was once the main engine started with all the top pistons bobbing up and down and the extra heat and noise. I couldn't believe anyone could think in those conditions, let alone work. The Sixer telling me it was cold enough to wear a shirt and trousers beneath the white boiler suit did not fill me with anticipation.

A convention was soon struck with the three engineer cadets carrying out day watches in the engine room, maintaining and servicing equipment such as pumps and generators and becoming accustomed to routine of engine room life.

The first few days of the trip sailing down the Irish Channel across the Bay of Biscay en-route for Curaçao to refuel, were noted by fewer and fewer cadets turning up for breakfast each morning. By the Sunday, there were just five of us left and I thought I had made it as a hairy seaman. Unfortunately on the weekly inspection that morning, I looked along the line of uniformed cadets rocking backwards and forwards with the roll of the ship, and that was me out for the day.

As the trip towards Curaçao progressed, I began to relish the novelty of blue seas and skies, sun, and flying fish. We passed Guadeloupe and Martinique, places I had only seen on French Colonial stamps and arrived at Curaçao on 13 October. The Saturday film, watched just prior to arriving at Curaçao on a test book tropical night, on the after deck against a screen developed from a sail, was a Scotland Yard police epic, *The Long Arm*. It starred Jack Hawkins and other British reliables such as Sam Kydd, Glyn Houston, Geoffrey Keen and would you know, Nicholas Parsons. Very English, very NZS that film. The engine room temperature rose to 96F. The older hands said the really hot stretch was between Curaçao and Panama. Although we were not allowed ashore, Curaçao was an eye opener with my first swim in the warm Caribbean albeit I remember safeguarded by shark nets.

The next stop, Panama was another eye-opener and a place where a couple of the main engine's cylinders would be opened up, pistons and con rods removed, cleaned and replaced, measurements taken of bearing clearances and the cylinders re-assembled for the long trek across the Pacific. Climbing through the engine's panels into the crankcase with a 15lb sledge and a ring spanner the size of a car tyre to un-hammer the bottom end bolts is a memory that will stay with me forever.

Let's get technical – as far as I can recall. The process of measuring the bearing clearance involved undoing these epic nuts, releasing the bearings, inserting lead wire in the clearances between the con rods and the bearing surface, replacing and retightening the bottom ends, only to take the whole construction apart again so the now-squeezed thickness of the lead could be measured.

It was the stuff of heroes in the Stygian gloom of a crankcase. It was all by muscle with only a trailing light and a sweating engineer for company in a compartment that a few hours previously had been filled with hot lubricating oil. Woe-betide anyone who dropped

anything in the crankcase pit! Meanwhile the crew and 'bridge people' were going ashore and savouring Panama's delights!

I remember the Pacific as one long endless sea-haul starting with a brief view of the Galapagos Islands. A swimming pool was constructed on deck to provide some relief from the sun and boredom. It was also a pleasure for us engineer cadets, who encountered our fair share of oil and grime, to see the deckies up to their elbows in Stockholm tar, a pretty noxious and long lasting protection for rigging. The repetitive actions of holystoning also appeared fun.

Mornings started with PE supervised by 'Pete', a stocky-built, bull-mastiff of a character who appeared to have more strength in his chin than we had in our whole bodies. Breakfast followed served by Ron the pantry boy. As I remember, food was pretty good but I guess we were so famished with all our physical activities, we would have eaten rusty nails as long as there was brown sauce. It was the first time I had eaten Force Flakes, which proved a staple cereal of the NZS.

I think it was about five weeks before we reached Aotea Quay at Wellington. For the last couple of weeks, as we inched our way southerly across the Pacific, the water took on a different blue gradually becoming emerald green. It became colder and more like the Irish Sea and we moved out of whites back into blues. My first sight of albatrosses will not be forgotten as will missing out a Monday because of the International Date Line. I spent many off-duty hours just watching the albatross wheel amongst the crests of those mountainous breakers.

We saw some action when another NZS ship, the MV Hinakura about 200 miles ahead of us signalled that a member of its crew had suspected acute appendicitis. As we had a doctor, could the Rakaia help? We rendezvoused with her at about 4.30pm and after days of clear visibility, down came the rain at times completely obscuring the Hinakura. The patient was transferred and by 10.30pm was without his appendix. We engineer cadets helped in some way by fashioning stomach clamps, rather like tyre levers but much bigger, out of the sheet brass stocked in the engine room workshop.

I'm told New Zealand in the Fifties was rather like Scotland in the Thirties. Certainly fashion in popular music was well behind the UK, cars were still the traditional Austin, Morris and Vauxhall, and cities like Auckland and Wellington were in our terms, still relatively small towns with few large buildings.

The next routine to settle into was coasting with at times up to a fortnight in a port unloading British manufactured goods and then being timbered out for the refrigerated meat and butter for home consumption. I enjoyed this period exploring the different characters of each port although as I look back now, I should have taken advantage of the long periods in port to go further inland to some of the more touristy sites. By dint of persuading Chiefie, Mr Cowper, that we should be concentrating on engine room matters, and underlining our third-year cadet status, we avoided the early morning bugle calls and runs around Wellington the deckies endured.

One social occasion was the Ship's Dance with drinks supplied by the NZS, which brings back memories of sly-grogging and home brew. At one port, either Napier or New Plymouth, a team of Rakaia cadets took on the local water polo team. Was I exhausted at the end of that match!! To put it mildly, they swum rings around us, and I don't think we

ever got near their goal. I reckoned they had been born in the water. Until that moment, I considered myself a fair swimmer so I excused the hammering to being unfit and not having swum for a few months. Christmas and New Year was a bit hectic to put it politely with a chosen few ordered to stay sober.

On the homeward leg, we were put on watches with me taking the graveyard shift of 12-4. I remember reading that the Russians had sent a rocket to the moon and wondering if it had any significance? After the long Pacific haul, and transit through Panama - once again the servicing of two cylinders - the voyage northwards through the Caribbean was interesting. One day such was the fall in temperature, we breakfasted in whites and had dinner in blues. There was also the spectacle of a mini tornado between Haiti and Cuba with the ship rolling 27 degrees both ways. Next stop was the cold and ice of New York with its finned Cadillacs and Pontiacs, Greyhound buses, wall-to-wall TV, pop music stations and for me, jazz clubs at Birdland, the Metropole and the Embers. New York was just like the cinema had shown us.

The nine days on the Atlantic leg from New York was I remember cold and bleak making one wonder why anyone should bother to sail across in a yacht! Arrival and discharge at London early in February was momentous leaving a vessel and shipmates one had been close to for five months. We had learned a new language – smoko, tea and tabnabs, sly grogging, wharfies, Capstan Fine Cut; had grown from boys to men and at the age of 18 had seen sights and been given responsibilities people twice our age had yet to receive or carry-out.

Many who have now retired talk about how character forming their two-year National Service was. They look on it as the period in which their subsequent personal attitudes were formed. Although I missed National Service by a whisper, I think MV Rakaia and its crew of officers and cadets did exactly the same job for me.

There are many incidents that suddenly strike a bell with me. I hear a Dave Brubeck track from one of his early College LPs and it takes me straight back to the Rakaia's wardroom. Strangely, the smell of hot motorbike oil is akin to that from Rakaia's B&W engine. After 45 years, although many of the cadet's names have faded, I can still recall their faces and actions.

After a voyage of 4 months and 11 days on MV Rakaia, I paid off with £25 14s and 11d – and had never felt so rich, both in money and experience.

Christmas Day Menu – MV Rakaia – 25th December 1958

The New Zealand Shipping Company was always renowned as being one of the more conservative and classier shipping companies with plenty of mahogany, etiquette, uniforms and tradition. Judge by the Christmas day menu!

Cream of Tomato Soup
Consommé Celestine

Grilled Dover Sole, Ravisote
Roast Suffolk Turkey, Chipolata
Baked New Zealand ham, Saratoga

French Beans, Cauliflower and Parsley Sauce,
Chateau, Duchess and Persailles Potatoes

Cold Buffet
Roast Sirloin of Beef
Melton Mowbray Pie
Green Salad

Christmas Pudding, Rum Sauce
Peach Melba
Nuts, Dates, Figs, Dessert
Cheese, Rolls
Coffee

The Final Year – 1960-61

THE first day of March 1960 saw the end of the 18-month sea-going section of my engineering cadetship. I signed off the MV Hinakura in London's Victoria Docks after a five-month voyage, looking forward to some leave and to my final year in John Brown's Clydebank shipyard.

Since we had first signed on MV Rakaia in September 1958, Dave, Terry, and I had served on the SS Papanui, and on the two of the company's H-boats, the MVs Hurunui and Hinakura. From a standing start we'd been around the world twice, heard about but not tasted the fabled delights of Panama and Suez; we'd been all round New Zealand and the whole east coasts of Australia and the US. We'd even been coasting the UK and enjoying the flesh-spots of Newport and Cardiff.

I had signed off the Hinakura with almost £80 in my pocket excluding the £35 I had sent home in monthly allotments. I was a rich man indeed.

For the beginning of this stay, we were billeted in Glasgow's YMCA in Bothwell Street. By now all the NZS engineering cadets in this final year were drawn together so we met up with other colleagues who had started their sea life on either the Otaio or the Durham. The YM was a convenient spot situated just alongside the bus station and next to the square where Glasgow's dolls for the night plied their trade.

We were the youngest men in the establishment. We each had a small room which after the three-in-a-cabin squeeze at sea was welcome. It was a trek to and from the yard – despite the psychedelic speeds of the Glasgow bus companies. As the tenements of the Glasgow suburbs flashed past, I know what inspired Stanley Kubrick's final sequences of *2001 – A Space Odyssey*.

Although still assigned to experienced journeymen, we were given more responsibility in the yards and worked for extended times on lathes and drills in the machine shops, as welders and burners, or as fitters. One day a week, we studied Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering at Glasgow University. We were now fully recognised by the Broon's workforce and on first name terms with many of its workers which was heartening for us aliens. We'd even accepted making tea the traditional shipyard way - in what, for all the world, looked like baked bean tins with copper handles. To see the state of some tins after a lifetime of shipyard service would have broken any health inspector.

We were accustomed to having our visits to the toilets timed and of checking the answers to the Daily Express crossword with the watchman on the toilet turnstile. He often finished the crossword faster than we finished our toilet.

We had hardly arrived in the yards, when in the April, engineering apprentices all over Britain withdrew their labour as a strategy to improve their wages and conditions. The Clyde was one of centres of this action and with organiser Jimmy Reid being a magnetic and dynamic personality, most of the Clyde yards came to a standstill. Another organiser was Sir Alex Ferguson who was undertaking a toolmaker's apprenticeship in nearby Govan before he found success in football. The NZS sensing the seriousness of the situation sent us home on a very welcome leave. The apprentices we had been working with appreciated it wasn't our call and I was glad we stayed friends with many of them.

If we were going home, and had the £7.00 needed for a ticket, we caught the train, preferably the Caledonian. In those days, it delivered its passengers to London in something under six hours. There's a real sense of speed sticking your head out of a steamer doing 100mph plus.

If we hadn't the money, we hitchhiked. My record from Clydebank to a full English at home in the Thames Valley was 12 hours – almost as fast as the train. But Scotch Corner on a cold wet morning is not a place for contemplation.

After a couple of months, four of us moved out of the YM into a one-bedroomed flat at Partick. Dave and Terry slept in the bedroom, another Dave had the bed in the kitchen and I was on the put-you-up in the lounge. I must say this was an extremely happy arrangement. We all got on, shared the cooking and cleaning, had friends around and generally acted men-about-town. Dave bought himself a Bentley and Dave (2) a Rover. Today that sounds extravagant but in Glasgow and Edinburgh at the time, Rolls and Bentleys were very cheap. I regret the day I turned down the offer of a Railton Landau for £25.00. – what it would be worth now!! I remember the Bentley particularly for its two-tone exhaust note. You had a 'town' mode and a 'country' mode. The former 'burbled'; the latter sounded like you were hurtling down the Le Mans straight especially after Dave had tuned the exhaust with cast-off copper tubing. Dave (2)'s Rover was a more sedate model, a sit-up-and-beg classic with none of the raffishness of the Bentley but with plenty of initial problems. In fact for many weekends, the most we ever saw of Dave (2) was his legs and feet as he lay under his motor.

Glasgow was a superb city with plenty of entertainment focussing mainly on dance halls and cinemas. Pubs were a bit Spartan and restaurants were almost non-existent – apart from the mutton pie cafes. It was at the Locarno, we first learned the classic Glaswegian way of asking a girl for a dance. You approached nonchalantly, kicked the girl's foot and demanded "Ar y'dancin?" to which the statutory reply was "Ar y'askin?" The next gambit was the response "Yeah, I'm askin!" and then the girl was free to nod or just go on chatting to her mate. It sounds better in Glaswegian than in Middle English. So more often than not, the opening gambit was met by an incredulous stare and open-mouthed amazement. But once the barriers were down, we had great times.

I had always been interested in art and antiques so places like the Auction Halls and Glasgow's Barrowland market was a magnet. Rather like today's car boot sales, Barrowland was a huge area full of barras (English – market stalls) selling either all the

swag that had been nicked in Glasgow the previous night or with true market salesmen selling all sorts of tat but with the most glorious spiel.

The auction rooms were another attraction. A local Scots friend bought a grand piano there for £7 and an Edwardian chaise longue for £2.00. I put my hand up for a 20ft high portrait of a Scotsman in full Highland dress but didn't have the courage to collect it. I assume it's still there. Lewis's department store was also the main place for croudie – a Scottish cheese made from soured milk rather similar I suppose, to the Mongolian cheese made from rancid mare's milk.

In April 1961, our year in Clydebank ended and I received my sailing orders to join SS Kent at the Isle of Grain as junior engineer. For me it had been a memorable final year. The alternative entry training scheme had given us the technical and seagoing expertise and experience we needed, and had also developed our mechanical and engineering skills. It was an extremely well thought out career path and increased the number of Thamesiders trained as marine engineers! The fact that many of its cadets quickly reached senior rank in the NZS was a true reflection of its worth.

Forty years later, one looks back at the friendships and experiences of all those years – the college terms, the sea trips, the time in the yards and one realises they were truly character forming. Unfortunately, the writing was on the wall for the British Merchant Navy and those shipping companies that were household names and which had developed with the British Empire. Many of us left the Merchant Navy in advance of its great extinction. The British Merchant Navy's loss was British industry's gain.

Ends

© 2002 *The author has chosen to write under the pseudonym of ConRod partly as an oblique reference to one of his favourite authors and partly to stop more Nigerian scam letters. However in the spirit of true editorial anonymity, he has supplied his name and address.