

THREE BOYS IN A SHIP

Ian Todd

John Ormerod

Ian Jackson



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The photograph of *Antilochus* on the front cover is reproduced with the kind permission of John and Marion Clarkson.

Foreword

In leafy Talbot Road, in Oxton, part of Birkenhead, on Thursday 15th July 1993, the sun shone as befits a good English summer's day. It was comfortably warm, with a light breeze stirring the trees, and that, and the shadows cast by the fleecy cumulus clouds drifting across the sky, took the edge off the temperature.

As the afternoon wore on, the Bowler Hat Hotel at number 2, Talbot Road opened its doors to three elderly, but none the less sprightly, though balding, men. First, from the completely unfindable village of Lower Somerton, in Suffolk, came John Ormerod, clocking in at sixty-six years of age. Then, a little while later, all the way from Tiverton in mid Devonshire, Ian Todd, also sixty-six, arrived and checked in. Ian was closely followed by Ian Jackson, the eldest of the trio by a matter of months, at sixty-seven, after completing the two-hundred mile drive from Melrose, home of seven-a-side rugby, in the Scottish Borders. All three, by chance, had travelled much the same distance to Birkenhead.

Each, rested, showered and spruced up, forgathered as arranged months before in Ian Jackson's room at six in the evening. There, an appropriate array of bottles was displayed ready for use. It took no Hercule Poirot to work out that some sort of party was about to begin.

Why, and what for?

Because fifty years earlier, to the day, these same three, boys then, not even young men, had joined Alfred Holt's vintage steamer *Antilochus* as first trip midshipmen, the somewhat high flown title by which that company's apprentices were known. This gathering had been planned by John Ormerod and Ian Jackson in 1990; Ian Todd having gone missing in Australia, but, in the intervening years, a bit of very Poirot-like detective work had found him, so all three first trippers could be present. Missing, unfindable, was Cyril Bridgeland, Senior Midshipman for the voyage, who had defied all our efforts to locate him.

There follows our joint recollection of that voyage, the only voyage that we shared, though we did have later ships in common at different times.

The Lads

Apprentices in what became known as “The Merchant Navy” came from all walks of life, which was hardly surprising with the fleet being made up of ships belonging to companies of enormous diversity. Seeing themselves as occupying the top of the heap were companies like Cunard, P & O, Orient and Royal Mail, though, for apprenticeship purposes, Cunard can be discounted, for they never had any, poaching their young officers from the companies that had trained them! One stage down (from the point of view of P & O et al) came the likes of Union Castle, British India, Canadian Pacific and, perhaps, Bibby.

Next in the pecking order came the best of the primarily cargo companies such as New Zealand Shipping, Pacific Steam, Blue Funnel, Federal, Shaw Savill, Ben Line and the Ellerman companies.

Thereafter came the less prominent cargo liner operators and the larger tramp owning firms, then the smaller tramp companies and onwards down the scale, fleets getting smaller even down to single ships, and ships getting smaller down to tiny coasters.

The work in a P & O passenger liner was very different from the work in a five thousand ton tramp hauling coal from Barry to South America and grain thence home, but both had to do with the business of getting a ship and her cargo from here to there, and then back, over an unfriendly ocean. Ships of all types had much in common: masts and rigging; derricks and hatches and hatchcovers; winches to work the derricks and for mooring; anchors for anchoring; engines for propulsion; sextants, charts, chronometers, almanacs and Norie’s tables for navigation; lead lines for sounding, flags for signalling....the list of common features, and thus of common skills, is endless, far longer than any list of differences.

So the training of those aspiring to officer status in whatever type of ship started from the same base, four years of sea time; time spent at sea in ships, or under articles with a shipping company. Anyone who had the required four years of sea time could sit the Second Mate’s exam, and some able seamen and deckhands did so, but the commoner route was through an apprenticeship. So, whether a lad strutted a P & O bridge in a brass bound uniform whilst “serving his time” or did the work of an ordinary seaman in a tramp the things to be learned to tackle the Board of Trade exams were the same. And, indeed, whatever slot in the pecking order the ship occupied, the apprentices could expect more than their fair share of the muckiest jobs.

As the liner trades developed into a major part of British seafaring activity, and the great companies operating in those trades became significant in the industrial establishment, so the desirability of developing officers by means other than bringing them aboard through the hawse pipe became apparent, and the

shipping companies themselves founded the training ships, which, in place of a secondary education, prepared boys for a seagoing career. Most famous of all was *Conway*, in the Mersey. *Worcester* was moored in the Medway. Pangbourne was a dry land establishment in Berkshire. In addition to these, the Technical Colleges in the major seaports developed pre-sea courses of a year or more for boys wishing to take up apprenticeships.

All these establishments sent boys to sea with a precious allowance of up to a year off the sea time needed for Second Mate. And they had the perhaps not unintended effect of “middle classifying” the officer base of the Merchant Navy.

All three of the *Antiochus* first trippers came through these establishments.

Ian Todd, the youngest of the three and sixteen and a third years old in July 1943, was the son of a man who had progressed from being the Flat Paper Buyer for a firm of paper merchants in London through, after a policy disagreement with his employers, the job of Sales Manager for a Northern paper mill to the founding of his own firm. Originally set up in Belfast “United Paper Merchants” moved to Glasgow in 1942, so Ian’s Scottishness, though originating in a Scottish Father, was less deep rooted than we all thought at the time. Through all the moves that the family made, Ian was educated at, in Surrey, Worcester Park Primary School and Sutton County School. Then, in Northern Ireland, at Ballyclare High School and Belfast Mercantile College, now Belfast High School, where he gained his School Leaving Certificate.

When the family moved to Glasgow, Ian, in 1942, enrolled at the School of Navigation at the Royal Technical College, Glasgow, on a one year course. With Ian’s middle class and paper industry background one might ask why?

The answer may well lie in the fact that his father was, despite his commercial success, a frustrated seafarer. Perhaps the First World War, in which, rather than serving in the navy as one might have expected, he served in the London Scottish until his battalion was wiped out, when he transferred to the Royal Flying Corps, put the idea out of his mind. But ships and the sea have long tentacles, and Ian was brought up with a seafaring career in mind; the idea becoming a near obsession when he, aged eight, and his family were passengers in a ship from London to Leith. Passing Flamborough Head, the Master allowed Ian to hoist the ship’s signal letters. In Ian’s own words, “from that moment my determination to go to sea was absolute”.

The desire to go to sea is present in many more people than do, in fact, go. Its origins are seldom as clearly identifiable as Ian’s, but, once planted, the craving is all but ineradicable. The vast numbers of marinas around our coasts and the fact that every gravel pit and pond in the country hosts a sailing club bear testimony to that.

At the end of his course in Glasgow, Ian was one of the top two cadets, and both were offered apprenticeships by the New Zealand Shipping Company and Alfred Holt and Co. Ian chose NZS but discovered that they had a height requirement of five foot ten, which he could not match. He rationalizes that requirement by wryly commenting that “perhaps the bridge dodgers were higher than in other ships”. Whatever the reason, his exclusion from NZS led him to sign indentures with Alfred Holt & Co., and to his joining *Antilochus* in 1943.

The other two first trippers came to Alfred Holt by the Pangbourne route. Pangbourne operated rather differently from *Conway* and *Worcester*, standing in place of a Public School, entered by passing the Common Entrance exam and keeping boys until they went to sea, into the forces or to university. Today, few go to sea, but in 1943 seventy five percent did so, the others going into the armed forces. In late June of that year, just before the School Certificate exams, a notice appeared on the board saying that Alfred Holt had places for three midshipmen. John maintains that I, Ian Jackson, was standing by the board when he joined me and that I said “I’ve applied, what about you”, and he did. The other cadet was named Shaw, but he didn’t sail with us.

Shaw should not have taken up the third place. The original third applicant was John Benn, known to his friends as “Charlie”, heaven knows why. But his parents had lost a son in France, and they asked him to stay longer at school, for he was then only sixteen. The world is a cruel place, for he joined Holts the next year and, on 16th August 1944, was lost when *Empire Lancer* was sunk by a submarine in the Mozambique Channel with the loss of forty-one souls including the Master, all the deck officers and the midshipmen.

Though John Ormerod and I had Pangbourne in common our backgrounds were entirely different. John was born into a long established Lancashire family and then lived in Beardwood Old Hall, near Blackburn, with his father, then a Circuit Judge later to be a Lord Justice of Appeal, his mother and one sister, the other sister being a WREN at that time in Ceylon. Where the desire to go to sea came from nobody knows and even John can’t identify the source; but it must have been there, else why go to Pangbourne when many another Public School was open to him? It is hard to imagine a less likely nursery for sea mania than the elegant, draughty house of a Judge, but there it was and there it grew. Perhaps, in sending John to Pangbourne, the family thought that he would grow up, see sense and go on to do something other than go to sea. If that was the case, their hopes were frustrated for, on 15th July 1943, John joined *Antilochus*.

John maintains that he had hoped, by applying to Holts, to dodge the School Certificate exam, but that Danny Pearce, who ran Holt’s midshipmen’s department, rumbled him and sent him back to Pangbourne for the exam. But for that, he might not have sailed in *Antilochus* with us.

I, Ian Jackson, was born into another Lancashire family, to Sam Jackson who, by

way of Bury Grammar School, The Lancashire Fusiliers, the Irish Guards, the Royal Flying Corps and Manchester University had gone into retailing. Leaving University with a degree in psychology, he was picked up by Lewis's Ltd., and, by 1943, was General Manager of their Manchester store with a seat on the Board.

Another unlikely nursery for sea mania. On my mother's side of the family there was only one extant seafarer, Jack Arnot, an officer with the Burmah Oil Company, who devoted substantial efforts to preventing me going into the Merchant Navy, suggesting that the Royal Navy was a far better bet. The family listened, and I was entered for Dartmouth but didn't even get to the entrance exam, failing both the interview and the medical, the latter on an obscure varicose vein technicality. But I had never contemplated any occupation other than seafaring and was sent off to Pangbourne. Perhaps my parents, too, hoped that it would wear off. But it didn't, if a temporary hankering for the Royal Air Force is discounted.

The desire to go to sea manifests itself in many ways. Sam Jackson's schoolboy talent had shown itself in chemistry, and he intended to do that at university after the First World War. But Sam maintained that, on enrolment day, the psychology queue was shorter than the chemistry queue, and it was opening time, so he signed up for psychology. I failed School Certificate chemistry but, though being a pretty poor hand at maths, scraping a bare pass, managed a distinction in Navigation. You learn what you want to know!

These, then, were the three boys who arrived in Liverpool filled with the anticipation of starting their seafaring lives, with the excitement of putting their schooldays behind them and embarking on young manhood albeit with a certain apprehension. The adventure on which they were about to embark was, setting aside the basic training which they had each received, a hefty leap in the dark. Though the lads went blithely off to sea their mothers stayed at home and read of the shipping losses in the newspapers, and worried.

Birkenhead and Liverpool

Alfred Holt had two establishments on Merseyside devoted to the needs of the band of boys/young men known, derisively in the world of shipping, as “Alfred Holt’s young gentlemen”, officially as midshipmen and, more generally, as apprentices.

In Aigburth, on the Liverpool side, there was a hostel in Riversdale Road, a large private house run by two sisters, one a widow, the other a spinster. I hope they were well paid; looking after a dozen or more lads, some newcomers, but mostly healthy young men full of high spirits and the normal youthful urges, was a job requiring the patience of Job, the wisdom of Solomon and a good thick skin. Then, Riversdale Road was just a dormitory and mess hall. Later, it was developed into a full blooded pre-sea training establishment with, after the fashion of the Royal Navy, a name fitting into the pattern of names of all Blue Funnel ships, or nearly so. “Aulis” was the place where Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter, Iphigenia, before embarking on the Trojan adventure. An appropriate name, as *Agamemnon* was the name of the steamer with which Alfred Holt founded his Far Eastern service in 1866. That first voyage led on to others, to more and bigger ships until, at the outbreak of the Second World War, the highly respected Blue Funnel line numbered more than seventy ships, all of high quality, ranging in age from *Antilochus*, *Teucer*, *Bellerophon*, *Cyclops* and *Titan* of 1906 to the brand new *Priam* and *Telemachus*.

All the ships carried either two or, more often, four midshipmen, all indentured on terms that would in today’s industrial conditions be Industrial Tribunal fodder of a high order. The contract was a three cornered one embracing the midshipman, his parents and Alfred Holt & Co. In 1943, the indenture called for “The provision of sufficient Meat, Drink, Lodging and, except in Great Britain, with Medicine and Medical and Surgical Assistance, and pay to the said Apprentice the sum of £51.0.0 in the manner following: (that is to say)

£12.0.0 for the first year

£15.0.0 for the second year

£24.0.0 for the third year”

(this from my indentures; Pangbourne counted as a year’s sea time)

In return for these princely sums “the said apprentice hereby covenants that, during such time, the said apprentice will faithfully serve his said masters and their assigns, and obey their lawful commands, and keep their secrets, and will, when required, give to them true accounts of their goods and money which may be committed to the charge, or come into the hands of, the said apprentice; and that the said apprentice will not, during the said term, do any damage to his said masters, or their assigns, nor will he consent to any such damage being done by

others, but will, if possible, prevent the same, and give warning thereof; and will not embezzle or waste the goods of his masters, or their assigns, nor give or lend the same to others without their licence; nor absent himself from their service without leave; nor frequent taverns or alehouses unless upon their business; nor play at unlawful games; IN CONSIDERATION WHEREOF the said masters hereby covenant with the said apprentice that during the said term they, the said masters and their assigns, will and shall use all proper means to teach the said apprentice or cause him to be taught the business of a seaman and, so long as he applies himself diligently thereto, the business of a ship's officer."

The "said apprentice" was also required to provide himself with all wearing apparel and necessaries, on pain of provision by "the said masters" with deduction of the cost from the generous wages.

The wearing apparel was provided by the boy's parents on the basis of a clothing list supplied by the company and clearly not updated since the outbreak of war. Included were six white cotton patrol suits; by 1943, hot weather gear was white shorts and open necked shirts, or even the same in khaki, which meant that at the first opportunity we had to kit ourselves out with shorts. A flat crowned topee was another Victorian hangover seldom worn, though, ahead of their time, Holts insisted on the provision of good sunglasses. Important in the list was an adequate supply of dungarees, the all-purpose working clothing, which, to this day, makes me marvel at the concept of dungarees as a fashion item! All this and more to be contained in a good tin trunk, an extremely unwieldy thing to handle, carry and stow.

The office, which handled the affairs of midshipmen, assigned them to ships, sent them on leave and occupied them in the daytime when between ships and not on leave, was in a Victorian mansion at 54, Ullet Road, Birkenhead. It was run by one Dan Pearce, a most likeable man who had been a Blue Funnel officer and whose seagoing career had been cut short by injury. Breathing down his neck was a Director, Brian Heathcote, who, though he had the interests of the boys at heart, was not liked. Doing the donkeywork was Pearce's secretary, Helen Blair, an attractive young woman who managed, as far as I know, to fend off all the invitations from the randy young men who wanted to take her out.

Ullet Road was the first contact that the trio of first trippers, two lads and one John, had with the Holt Empire. Green and a little lost, we presented ourselves to Mr. Pearce to do as he told us and to learn of our future in terms of what ship or ships. After being checked over both medically and to assure "the said masters" that we had, indeed, the clothing listed and the books we would need to do the "office work" set for us during the voyage, we were kept occupied in study, mainly chartwork. At other times, lads at Ullet Road were sent across to Liverpool to learn about lifeboats and, perhaps, if time allowed, to get a lifeboat certificate or to learn about lifeboat engines, the world's most temperamental form of internal combustion engine not even excluding the outboard motor. And

we were issued with our office work, which consisted of a set of exam papers in trigonometry, navigation, seamanship, ship construction and like subjects and an essay on a specified subject. All to be completed by the end of the voyage; often completed between the Bar Lightship and the Gladstone Dock.

At the end of each day we crossed under the Mersey from Hamilton Square and made our way to Riversdale Road for our evening meal, after which we were allowed out. The pictures was a popular way to fill an evening as was a visit to the Rialto ballroom where there were plenty of girls willing to dance with we children. John tells the tale of asking a girl to dance only to be told, in a scouse accent you could cut with a knife, "ask me sister....I'm sweating". In 1943, at our tender ages of sixteen and seventeen, we had not yet developed a taste for the drink.

Then one day Mr. Pearce got the three of us together and told us that we were, with Cyril Bridgeland as Senior Midshipman, to join *Antilochus* for a voyage to Montevideo and Buenos Aires. Not one of the three first trippers was pleased for, to us, New York was the only place to go. How wrong we were. Cyril was less than delighted for another reason; he knew that *Antilochus* was a coal burner and one of the three oldest ships in the fleet. And three first trippers for company? Little did we know that she would be one of the happiest ships in which we were ever to serve.

Who and what were *Antilochus*? The male Antilochus, after whom the ship was named, was the son of Nestor, king of Pylos, "a brave fighter and charioteer"; after the truce in the Trojan War, "Antilochus was the first to kill a Trojan captain, tough on the front lines, Thalysias's, son of Echepolus. Antilochus thrust first, speared the horsehair helmet right at the ridge and the bronze spear point lodged in the man's forehead, smashing through his skull and the dark came whirling down across his eyes...".

The female, the ship, was the first of two to carry the name for Alfred Holt. Ian Todd made his first voyage in the first *Antilochus*, and his last as mate of the second. The first was built by Hawthorn Leslie & Co in Newcastle in 1906, one of a class of five built for the Glasgow, Liverpool, Singapore, China, Japan, Vancouver and Seattle route. She was nine thousand and eleven tons gross, four hundred and eighty five feet long on a beam of fifty-eight feet. She drew thirty-one feet loaded in her seven holds served by nine hatches, two of the holds being particularly long for the carriage of logs. She had goalpost masts forward between numbers two and three hatches and a pair of samson posts of equal height but without the crossbar between numbers seven and eight. These posts carried eight ten-ton derricks, the rest of the cargo handling gear being eighteen two-ton standing derricks supported by samson posts doubling as ventilators. Below every derrick was a Clarke Chapman steam winch.

She was a twin screw ship powered by two triple expansion steam engines each

developing five hundred and eighty three horsepower, which gave her a service speed of twelve knots. The two double-ended Scotch boilers burned coal, ninety tons a day of it. In appearance, she was long and low being flush decked but for a short forecastle in which nobody lived, it being devoted to bosun's and lamp trimmer's stores. Aft of number three hatch rose the bridge structure with the saloon, engineers' mess room, Chief Engineer's and Chief Steward's and other engineers' rooms on the main deck. Above that, at boat deck level, were the mates' rooms, and then, above them, the Old Man had a deck all to himself with a sleeping cabin, a day room and a bathroom. Above him were the bridge, wheelhouse, chartroom and pilot's cabin and, on top of that, the monkey island and standard compass.

The monkey island was something of a magic place. The standard compass was surrounded by a waist high timber screen and had on it the "Azimuth" device used for taking bearings of things terrestrial and astronomic. The highest place in the ship, bar the masts, it provided a fine view of the vessel and the furthest sight of the horizon. To go up there to take a bearing of a distant lighthouse, or of the sun in fine weather, was, to we lads, something a bit special.

Numbers four and five, two small hatches, separated the bridge structure from the accommodation below the boat deck proper, which included the officers' bathroom, the galley, some more engineers' rooms and, most important of all, the half deck, home to the apprentices. This was at the after end of the block on the port side and was entered from an internal alleyway. It comprised a dayroom with a settee, a fixed table and two chairs and a commode or washstand. Forward of the dayroom was a room with four bunks in tiers of two and a bookcase mounted on a four-drawer chest of drawers. The first task of midshipmen joining a new ship was to leaf through the bible, for Lawrence Holt, the Company Chairman, was rumoured to hide the odd fiver therein. (Apocryphal). The deck was of pine planks, which had to be scrubbed snowy white. It sounds sparse, but it was really very comfortable and was steam heated by a tubular radiator under the settee.

In the deckhouse, abaft number nine hatch and on a deck below that, lived the sailors and firemen. Over the screws and steering gear, in rooms containing up to a dozen bunks, this accommodation simply wouldn't do today. It always reeked of opium, smoked by the Chinese firemen. This deckhouse was often, incorrectly, referred to as the poop, but it was not such, for a poop is the equivalent of a forecastle at the blunt end of the ship. On "the poop" were our two big guns, the four-inch for sinking submarines and the twelve-pounder for shooting down aircraft. It was a most unsuitable gun platform, for, being at the end of the ship, the motion in a seaway was greater than anywhere else in the ship, and it would rise and fall, tilt and sway and bounce up and down in the most unsettling manner, all these gyrations being accompanied by the incessant grinding of the steering engine below and the rumble and shake of the twin screws doing their work below that.

The steering engine, which moved the rudder in response to movements of the wheel on the bridge was not, as in modern ships, connected to the wheel by small bore oil pipes but by, from the bridge to the main deck, a length of chain and thence to the steering flat by iron rods running along the deck below the hatch coamings in metal rollers. While the steering engine moved the massive rudder, the link of chain and rod had to be moved by the turning of the wheel by the quartermaster, which explains why it was a beautiful, large diameter brass wheel; a lot of physical effort went into an hour at the wheel in heavy weather.

Antiochus carried eight boats: a small lifeboat and a motorboat on the bridge block, four boats on the boat deck and two on the after accommodation block. All wooden and guaranteed to sink to their buoyancy tanks when launched, until the seams took up.

Dominating the appearance of the ship was the funnel, a magnificent vertical cylinder rising some sixty feet from the boat deck, well stayed and carrying the steam whistle. In peacetime, it would have been painted Blue Funnel blue with a black top; the blue being a secret formula known only to the elite of boatswains and lamp trimmers in the fleet and containing exotic oils, dolly blue and other obscure ingredients modifying the crude colour supplied in tins. In wartime, the funnel was plain grey with a sooty top, a world away from glamorous blue and black. *Antiochus* could not be described as one of the ocean's great beauties, but she was a fine sea boat and by no means slow. Holt's ships, and their men, had to be sound, for they didn't insure the ships. Compared with today's brutal looking container ships and bulk carriers she was a gracious lady.

This venerable vessel was to be our first introduction to seafaring and our home for four months and ten days. Not a ship to gather headlines she did suffer a serious fire in 1911 and rescued the survivors from another Blue Funnel ship, *Mentor*, off Florida in 1942. One of those survivors was Peter Jackson, and one of the rescuers Bob Arnott, both midshipmen at the time, both of whom went on to command *Queen Elizabeth 2*. One of *Antiochus*' sisters, *Bellerophon*, made a voyage highly regarded in shipping circles. In 1927, in connection with what became known as "The China Incident" of that year, she loaded seven hundred and fifty horses, their troopers and their supplies at Birkenhead and steamed the whole way to Hong Kong with only a bunkering stop of twelve hours at Port Said. She survived both wars and was scrapped at Briton Ferry in 1948. Her two surviving sisters were scrapped the same year, all after forty-two years of service.

Going to Sea

July 15th 1943 dawned over Liverpool, including Riversdale Road, where the three neophytes rose, tidied their quarters, packed and had breakfast for the last time on this visit, their stomachs accommodating butterflies as well as their breakfasts; for, today, they wouldn't cross the river to Ullet Road but would join *Antilochus* in one of the Liverpool docks instead. The send off by the other midshipmen was a mixture of joshing and commiseration, for *Antilochus* was known to be old, and coal burners, even if you didn't have to actually stoke the fires, were dirty and hence hard work.

Though Blue Funnel ships usually loaded at Birkenhead, the war threw all the balls up in the air, and *Antilochus* was completing loading in a Liverpool dock after having filled the bulk of her lower holds with coal at Barry. The Liverpool cargo was general, its most memorable feature being thousands of cases of Scotch and hundreds of tons of soda ash fresh from the I.C.I. plants at Runcorn. There was also a quantity of bullion stowed in a specially constructed strongroom.

When we got down to the ship in our brass bound uniforms, burdened with our tin trunks, we were glad to be four strong for no help was offered, and we had to get ourselves and our gear on board unaided. Cyril had never sailed in a ship of this class before, but a combination of the Ullet Road grapevine and instinct told him where to find the half deck. So, one by one, we hauled our trunks up the gangway, and, one by one, we hauled them past numbers four and five hatches, along the narrow external alleyway, round the after end of the house and into our new home. Cyril, our boss, leader and mentor had the first pick of the bunks and chose the inboard lower. I don't remember any serious argument about who had which of the others, but I acquired the inboard upper, perhaps on account of my age. Not only did Cyril, as senior midshipman, get first pick of the bunks, but he took no part in the scrubbing of the deck of our home, that being work for juniors, especially first trippers, which meant we three.

We had no doubt that our arrival had been reported to Mr. Gatt, the mate, so, rather than beginning unpacking and stowing our gear, or as much of it as the single chest of drawers would hold, Cyril went off to report himself and his three bright green assistants aboard.

As apprentices we didn't sign on as did the rest of the crew from the Master down, our indentures being a running contract for the whole of their term. We had to obey the orders of "our masters and their assigns", one of whom was Captain Howe, Master of *Antilochus* for the voyage, for the whole of the period of slavery, didn't we? So that day, while the signing on process was being completed, Mr. Gatt allowed us to unpack and find our way about the ship. The officers were signed on at the shipping office that day, and their monthly rates of pay were as follows:

1 st Mate	G. G. Gatt	£34. 05. 00
2 nd Mate	H. P. R. Graham	£30. 00. 00
3 rd Mate	G. F. Sturrock	£22. 10. 00
4 th Mate	N. G. Roberts	£18. 10. 00
Carpenter	R. F. Bishop	£18. 05. 00
Bosun	F. Jones	£16. 10. 00
Lamp Trimmer	H. J. Clarke	£14. 10. 00
Chief Engineer	W. A. Barry	£48. 00. 00
2 nd Engineer	W. Kingan	£36. 05. 00
3 rd Engineer	F. Robinson	£27. 10. 00
4 th Engineer	J. J. Witts	£25. 00. 00
Asst. Engineer	H. Selby	£19. 00. 00
Asst. Engineer	R. B. Cable	£19. 00. 00
Asst. Engineer	R. Turner	£19. 00. 00
1 st Radio Officer	J. R. Dawson	£29. 00. 00
2 nd Radio Officer	G. R. T. Owen	£16. 00. 00
3 rd Radio Officer	J. Waring	£16. 00. 00
Surgeon	P. Ederer	£27. 00. 00
Chief Steward	R. A. Steele	£28. 00. 00
2 nd Steward	F. Cochran	£16. 00. 00

And then there were we four. Cyril on a princely two pounds a month, and the three first trippers on one pound a month. All, fortunately, increased by five pounds a month of "Danger money" paid by the government.

There were things we had to discover quickly. Though the half deck had a commode for washing and shaving, it had no other facilities; they were in the officer's bathroom a hundred feet forward of our door some sixty of which were open alleyway and open deck. The source of hot water had to be found, and it was the galley, situated at the forward end of our alleyway. On the stove was an enormous cauldron simmering gently from which you transferred water to your bucket using a large dipper before carrying the bucket back to the half deck or the bathroom. Cold water also came from the galley, from a standpipe with the luxury of a tap on it.

Nor had we just ourselves to think of, for Captain Howe's cold water supply was our responsibility. He had a fresh water tap in his bathroom, cold of course, fed from a tank on the monkey island. It was one of our permanent duties to keep this filled, and woe betide us if we failed. Hard enough work in dock, ferrying buckets along the deck and up four ladders from the main deck to the monkey island, but a much more arduous task when the ship was rolling and pitching at sea. The Captain's hot water supply was the same as ours, but it was his

steward's responsibility to get it as needed. Another "fail at your peril" domestic services job was keeping the sanitary salt water tank full, which involved setting a series of valves in the deck salt water system and then getting the engineers to give it a little extra pressure to get the water up to the tank on the monkey island. At least this didn't involve hauling the water up there by hand.

Antiochus sailed in the morning of 18th July, making her way seaward through the Formby Channel between the training walls built to keep the Lancashire sand dunes out of the fairway, then out past the Bar Lightship to mill around in the gaggle of shipping destined to make up convoy OS 51, bound for Freetown in West Africa. At last we three, agog, had taken the first step on the road to becoming seamen. But not for us the seamanlike bits of getting the ship to sea, the handling of ropes, getting derricks down and stowed for sea nor even collecting and stowing the rat guards. As green hands and entirely unknown factors in the nautical equation, Mr. Gatt had us sweeping the boat and upper decks as the experts took the ship down the Mersey. Not very romantic, but we had made a start.

All sailors are romantics; deny it though they will. For us the day's work didn't end when that job was done for we were then allocated to watches with the mates on the bridge, to get our first taste of "double watches", which was the rule in coastal convoy in Holt's ships, if not elsewhere. With four mates, the mate and the fourth mate usually doubled up as did the second and third and, in a ship carrying four midshipmen, two of these were allocated to each watch. This meant four hours on and four off, which, with dressing and undressing time accounted for, left only about three and a half hours of sleep at a stretch. Any length of time spent on double watches left one more than a little tired, and one has to wonder whether two fatigued brains and pairs of eyes were any more effective than one less weary outfit. The theory was, that in confined waters, there should be one mate seeing to navigation and the other to collision avoidance. In those days, there was no Radar to ring alarm bells should a collision situation develop or to provide bearings and distances from navigational marks; nor did many ships have echo sounders to aid navigation. But, if everyone on the bridge was half asleep, were double watches the best option?

As we three first trippers had all been to Nautical College of one sort or another, we could, apart from having young, keen eyes and being useful as lookouts, contribute to the signalling function, for we knew the flags of the International Code and Morse Code as well. In peacetime ships went from one end of a passage to the other without hoisting a flag or flashing a lamp, but, in convoy, it was very different; signalling went on all the time in daylight, part of the effort to keep the convoy in formation and going in the right direction.

The convoy didn't take up its final formation as it sailed West and North round the Isle of Man towards the North Channel, for the pinch between the Mull of Kintyre and Rathlin Island is only twelve miles wide, and, once through that, we were to

be joined by the Glasgow contingent and take up our proper shape. Meanwhile, we proceeded in two columns, *Antilochus* being in the port hand of the two.

Sailing day had been grey and drizzly with the Mersey not looking its best, but a day later, after a night of bumbling up the Irish Sea at a stately seven knots, the convoy speed, the nineteenth dawned bright and clear and turned into a gem of an English summer's day as the armada ploughed on, past the Antrim mountains on one hand and the Rhinns of Galloway on the other as the ships approached the Mull. That afternoon, in the four to eight watch, I was on the bridge with Cyril, the second mate Mr. Graham and Mr. Sturrock, the third. It was an afternoon to shift any doubts that any one of us might have had about the wisdom of going to sea. A cloudless sky, a light breeze, and we were bound for Montevideo on a great adventure, trying to do our bit to make *Antilochus* an effective and trouble free unit of the convoy. What more could a lad want? Certainly not the engine room voice pipe whistle sounding and Mr. Graham taking the message that a boiler problem would, immediately, drop our speed below seven knots and force us to leave the convoy. As the speed fell away, Captain Howe came up to the Bridge, the ship hauled out to port of the line to make way for the ships astern, and the second mate retired to the chartroom to get out the charts of the Clyde and to lay off the courses to the Tail of the Bank. An ignominious end to our first convoy, and on such a glorious day!

The following day, *Antilochus* anchored off Gourock where she lay for nearly three weeks while the boiler was put to rights and, when that was done, waited for the next Glasgow to Freetown convoy.

Our disappointment was profound, and misplaced, for we enjoyed a spell of perfect weather and got to know each other far better than we would ever have had we been launched on a long spell of watchkeeping without our three week "holiday", though it was hardly that, for the mate had no intention of letting us be idle. We made our acquaintance with the ubiquitous chipping hammer and associated red lead paint. The ship being thirty-seven years old, rust had, despite careful maintenance, taken its toll, and we spent many a day chipping and painting deckhouses, bulwarks, samson posts, indeed anything on the main deck that didn't live and breathe. We learned that, should we find a spot where chipping rust left no plating, just a hole, red lead, brown paper, red lead, more brown paper and a final dash of red lead made an adequate repair. We learned the joys of painting deckheads and how the rivets tend to make the brush drip paint on the worker and, in due course, how to avoid that. Rollers had not yet been invented.

Mr. Gatt introduced us to "sooji", the all purpose soap used for washing paintwork, a job much needed in a ship very unrefresh after a month in port, and after loading coal. *Antilochus* had wooden decks all dirty and stained from cargo work, and we did our share of scrubbing these with a particularly vicious strength of caustic soda, the job being known as "barberising" the decks. But the dear

man had a real joker up his sleeve when he asked us to sort the potatoes in the lockers atop the after deckhouse, "some of which might be rotten". Mr. Gatt was well informed, for an awful lot of them were rotten, really rotten, some sacks being almost liquid; the contents, when the sack was upended, squelching onto the deck in a haze of noxious fumes. When the job was done, a certain amount of clothing was fit for nothing more than consignment to the deep, to keep the spuds company and no doubt drive the fish away.

But it wasn't all work. In that glorious summer, four healthy, fit young men found plenty to do. If we weren't going ashore, a swim over the side between work and dinner was just the thing, diving off the rail and returning up the gangway. John once misjudged the turn of the tide and was nearly swept away, to be hauled aboard by the gunners who threw him a rope from the stern as he struggled with the current. A bit accident prone, our John; he had a potentially much more serious incident later on in the voyage.

Our gunners were Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve sailors serving in merchant ships as DEMS (defensively equipped merchant ship) gunners. There weren't enough of them to man all of our vast armament, a four-inch gun and a twelve-pounder on the after house, two Hotchkiss machine guns, one on each wing of the bridge for frightening seagulls, and two Oerlikon twenty millimetre cannon in concrete pits on the boat deck. We also had a wonderful invention known as a "PAC" (parachute and cable) rocket, four of them, on the boat deck. This magic weapon fired into the sky a parachute and a thousand feet or so of piano wire, which hung from it and into which the enemy aircraft was supposed, obligingly, to fly. One of us, who shall be nameless, fired one once by mistake whilst fiddling about with the aldis lamp plug on the bridge. The wire wrapped itself round the aerials and after goalposts, leaving the parachute trailing in the wake! The later version, the "FAM" (fast aerial mine) had a bomb on the end of the wire, making it yet more formidable.

Though there were not enough gunners to man this vast array of weapons, they naturally took the best jobs, the two Oerlikons and the gunlayer's job on the two guns on the poop. Merchant seamen acted as their loaders, and Ian Todd was given one of the Hotchkiss guns on the bridge. We all had tin hats, and Ian maintains to this day that his was too big, and, every time he fired the gun, it fell down over his eyes and obscured the target. John and I both had jobs on the poop, he as loader for both guns, for we had insufficient manpower to fire them both at once, whilst I was sight setter on both. Without the training we got whilst at anchor in the Clyde, we would have been an even more ragged army than we actually turned out to be.

The motorboat was in the water, and it was part of our job to run it as required to the shore at Gourrock or to other ships. This, traditionally, is apprentices' work and is one of the better jobs, especially in good weather. Yachting on the Clyde in perfect weather; well, not quite that but close to it. We were allowed ashore of

an evening, and, not being into the drink at that stage, we tended to go to the pictures, to milk bars or to dances to indulge our callow interest in girls. One evening John and I got a lift on the back of an open lorry to Glasgow where we sampled the delights of Green's Playhouse Ballroom. How we got back I can't remember, but there were regular trains. We could probably only afford the fare one way and that thanks only to the danger money, the five pounds a month that the government added to our pay. Everyone else in the ship got ten pounds; we thought that that was one of life's greater injustices. But for that five hundred percent addition to our pay we would have been hard put to go ashore at all, such would have been our poverty. It was when going ashore on one of these expeditions that Ian Todd saw his first corpse, floating by the landing steps at Gourock. Gave him quite a turn, but didn't spoil his evening.

When we stayed on board of an evening we had the benefit of a gramophone, which some previous occupant had left in the half deck. It was short of a needle, so Cyril bought some on a trip to Glasgow, and we made good use of the existing stock of records, a catholic selection including "The Quaker Girl", "Swan Lake", "Traviata" and "White Horse Inn". And I recall that we sang a bit from time to time with Ian Todd's rendering of "Roaming in the Gloaming" being very appropriate to our situation. Most ships have an ample supply of books over and above those in the half deck bookcase and we read a lot. I don't recall our having been card players. We smoked Woodbines at a shilling for fifty or Player's at one and six, and foul pipe tobacco, almost free. When my father, the night before I set off for Liverpool, sat on my bed to impart worldly advice he said to me "don't go with women, but, if you do, tell me about it"; he also said "don't smoke cigarettes, here's a pipe". I tried it once, in the Clyde, was unwell and gave it up forever, fags being less harmful.

All in all, our sojourn in the Clyde was extremely pleasant. The Tail of the Bank is a spacious anchorage off Gourock where the Holy Loch and Loch Long join the Firth of Clyde as it turns from West to South around Cloch Point. To the North loom the Highlands with Ben Ime and the Cobbler, just beyond the head of Loch Long, less than twenty miles distant, and Ben Lui, towering to three thousand seven hundred feet and visible on a good day ten miles further on. To the East, the Kilpatrick Hills with the Campsie Fells beyond, and, to the West, the Cowal peninsula. Southward, lay the Firth of Clyde and the sea. Today, cruise ship passengers would pay large sums of money for three weeks such as we had that summer, always provided that they were excused sorting rotten potatoes and chipping paintwork.

At any time, the Tail of the Bank is a busy anchorage for ships waiting on a tide to take them up to Glasgow or preparing for sea having come down the river. In wartime, ships awaiting convoy gathered there, and the great troop carrying passenger liners sent their soldier passengers ashore from the anchorage. Whilst we were there, we were lucky enough to see both the Queens, *Mary* and *Elizabeth*, and *Aquitania* and *Ile de France*, all of which, almost nondescript in

their grey wartime paint, crept in, sent their cargoes ashore and crept out again. We even saw a battle cruiser, *HMS Renown* paying a visit to the Clyde while we were there.

All good things come to an end. The boiler was fixed, and convoy number OS 53 for Freetown began to gather. On 9th August, *Antiochus* hove up her anchor and set off to sea. Again.

Off Again

I don't suppose that Mr. Gatt gave it a moment's thought, but we three boys were a lot more use to *Antilochus* when she sailed from Gourock than we had been when she sailed from Liverpool, even though the time interval was a mere three weeks. Our time at anchor had not all been spent chipping paint and grading potatoes aboard and idling ashore.

We got to know the ship. We knew our way about her both in the geographical sense and, vitally, we knew where to go for what when we found ourselves at a loss. Though we had not yet been in any of her seven holds, we knew where to go when somebody told us to fetch something from "by number seven hatch", or from the bosun's or lamptrimmer's stores. I don't think any of us was sent down to the engine room to get the key of the keelson, or for a long stand, or to anyone for the key of the fog locker, but no doubt, even then, we would have fallen for it.

John and I had been drilled by the gunners to the point where we knew what to do should we go to action stations, as had the rest of the amateur gun's crew. Ian Todd hadn't yet fired his Hotchkiss but had been taught how to load it and what to do should it jam; it was simply assumed that, if he had to fire it at a moving target, he would know how to aim it off. The Old Man hadn't yet run out of water (he never did) and we had kept our half deck clean to the mate's satisfaction and ourselves presentable though a mite overdressed in our swish patrol suits at meal times, despite having already made the mistake of washing white things and blue socks in the same bucket, a mistake which everyone makes once. All in all, we felt a bit more like sailors than we did three weeks earlier.

The Glasgow contingent of the main Liverpool/Freetown convoy weighed anchor in turn and set off single file past the Cloch Point lighthouse and down the Firth at a stately seven knots, the speed at which the amalgamated convoy hoped to progress. We sailed in the afternoon with fourteen hours to go to the western approach to the North Channel where we were to hang about awaiting the Liverpool section; we to hang about, for we were the smaller portion of the convoy. At that time of year in those latitudes there is virtually no full darkness, indeed on that night nautical twilight ended and official darkness began at three minutes to midnight, and the next day's morning twilight began fifty seven minutes later. So we sailed in daylight down past Inellan and Wemyss Bay, through the channel between Little Cumbrae and Garroch Head on Bute and past Arran and Holy Island. In the gathering dusk, we left Ailsa Craig to port and, rounding the Mull of Kintyre in the brief darkness, rolled gently northwestwards as the light began to return until, by dawn, *Antilochus*, with her companions and escort, were down to steerage way south of Islay with the Liverpool ships making up to join us.

The apprentices had been allocated to watches, four on and four off, for the first

days of the convoy, not so much to “learn the business of a seaman and, should we apply ourselves to that, of a ship’s officer” but in reality as lookouts and signalmen and general dogsbodies, though the job of making tea and toast still fell to the standby sailor of the watch. We might as well get used to it, for, with two thousand seven hundred miles to go to the point off Dakar where *Antilochus* would be detached from the convoy to proceed independently to Montevideo, we had, should the fleet maintain its seven knots and not be diverted, seventeen days of convoy ahead of us. Happily not seventeen days of double watches, which Captain Howe abandoned when the convoy was formed up and settled down. With four apprentices and three watches, this meant that one of us, usually Cyril for he was more advanced as a sailor, was on day work performing the duties of an able seaman, or helping the carpenter when he sounded all the wells and tanks each morning and evening.

The convoy which *Antilochus* joined was an amalgam of two convoys, KMS 23 comprising the first eight columns and bound for the Mediterranean and OS 53 made up of ships bound for Freetown and points onward. It gradually gathered itself together on a westerly course forming up over a matter of hours into twelve columns numbered one to twelve from left to right with the first ship in each column being numbered X1, the second X2 and so on. The Commodore, in position 51 at the head of column 5, was aboard S.S. *Lowlander*. When the convoy split in the latitude of Gibraltar, Alfred Holt’s *Neleus* took over as Commodore ship of OS 53 with Elder Dempster’s little four thousand ton *MacGregor Laird* taking over as Vice Commodore. *Antilochus* was in position 102 in the convoy with *Neleus* in position 91 on our port bow. In all, the convoy was made up of sixty-six cargo ships and tankers, trailed by the tiny rescue ship *Rathlin* in position 66.

The escort was fairly formidable. Three lend lease destroyers of the Fourth Escort Group, *Blackwood*, *Bazeley* and *Drury*; three frigates, *Trent*, *Test* and *Fal*; the Dutch *Johan Maurits van Nassau* and two sloops, *Redpole* and Johnnie Walker’s *Stork*, the last without him aboard. Five days later, in the Bay of Biscay, the cruiser *Bermuda* was added to the escort for anti-aircraft protection.

The weather held fair, better than that, as the convoy made a leg to the southwest to get clear of Ireland and to widen the gap between the air bases in Brittany and our route before turning just West of South to pass between the Cape Verde Islands and Dakar. As the days went by, we apprentices stood our watches on the bridge with Mr. Gatt, Mr. Graham, Mr. Sturrock and Mr. Roberts, keeping a lookout and, much more interestingly, handling the flag signal traffic put out by the Commodore. In those days, there was no such thing as VHF radio, and main radio silence was maintained to try to keep the convoy’s position from the waiting U-boats, so all communication was by flags or by Aldis lamp in daylight and by feeble signal torches at night. General convoy signals were by flag hoists, Aldis traffic pertaining to contacts between individual ships. Every day, just after noon, there was a routine signal HP3 followed by a latitude and

longitude, which was the rendezvous for the day after tomorrow should the convoy become scattered for any reason. Then there would be the course and speed signal, which every ship repeated with any alteration executed when the Commodore hauled down his flags. Indeed the whole of the flag signalling system hinged round every ship repeating every signal and, until every ship had the signal flying, the Commodore kept his flags up. Should a ship not repeat the hoist, she would be woken up by Aldis lamp or, as a last resort, by a visit from one of the escorts and a bawling out by loud hailer.

Generally the standard of signalling in convoys was high being chiefly in the hands of young lads who had something to prove. We kept a sharp eye on the Commodore's ship when signals were expected and did our level best to be the first ship to have the repeat flying from our signal halliards and then, at execution, tried to be the first down. The Commodore of the convoy had, of course, a staff of dedicated signalmen in his ship.

Even though we were in company with this multitude of other ships and under the orders of the Commodore, the mates had to keep the normal Blue Funnel navigation routines, fixing the ship's position by morning and evening stars, and by breakfast time and noon sights of the sun each day. Even though we had a continuous check on where we were, we still had to obey the Commodore's instructions as to where to go. Added to the mate of the watch's ordinary duties was the onerous business of station keeping, maintaining the correct distance from the ship ahead and from those on either side. The former was achieved by adjustments to the engine revolutions, alterations made by issuing orders down a voicepipe to the engine room. "Up two" and "down two" were commonly heard instructions to achieve this end.

Determination of the distance from other ships was either by using a rudimentary hand held rangefinder, which some ships had, or by using a sextant. The heights of the mainmasts of every ship in the convoy were included in the convoy's sailing instructions, and it was a simple matter to set the sextant to the appropriate angle for the required separation. Either way, the engineers made life a lot easier if they kept steady revolutions.

We were enjoying ourselves. At sea, at last, doing what we had always wanted to do and being paid (?) for doing it and being well fed into the bargain. The Savoy might have questioned that but not we, fresh from wartime feeding at Pangbourne and at home with rationing at its wartime worst. Breakfasts of porridge, fish, bacon and eggs, held down by griddlecakes and syrup, or toast. Lunch and dinner rotated hot and cold roasts with great gooey puddings and, just to make sure that we didn't fade away, bread and butter and jam for tea, all filled in with an unlimited supply of bars of chocolate. Far cry from what the population at home had to make do on.

And, as we slid down the ladder of latitude, the sun got warmer by the day. Off

watch we sunbathed and added to the tans, which had begun to show during our summer holiday in the Clyde. I fell asleep in the sun one afternoon and injured myself quite badly having my front, one side and my face severely blistered. We exercised, the habit developed by three years of "Accers", PT on the parade ground at seven in the morning, winter and summer, wet or fine, being hard to break. After dark, when the mate on watch couldn't see us, we raced each other up and down the after goalposts just for fun. We sang and larked and listened to records and generally acted like the just ex-schoolboys that we were. On duty we tried to become sailors, aided in that aim by the truly helpful Captain Howe and his four mates.

In the Bay of Biscay, the Focke Wulfs found the convoy and did not let it pass unchallenged. Imagine our surprise when signals came from the Commodore telling us that enemy aircraft were approaching, distant ninety miles on such and such a bearing. We didn't think that even the best of lookouts could see that far, and nobody had told us about Radar! By this time, *Bermuda* had been replaced by the anti-aircraft cruiser *Scylla*, and her first broadside as the Condors flew over the convoy rattled a few plates. The Condors made three attacks during the day but, fortunately, hit nothing, though *Neleus*, quite close to us in the convoy, was awash from a near miss. John and I did our bit to keep the twelve-pounder firing at the aircraft, but none were hit by any ship in the convoy and none came close enough for Ian to fire at with his little Hotchkiss. The Condors had reported us to hovering U-boats, and, for a brief spell, escorts flying black flags dashed about dropping depth charges without, as far as we knew, sinking any submarines. In any event, no torpedoes were fired at the convoy, nor did we get a shot with our four-inch gun, loaded and manned though it was. That gun was fired only once that voyage, at a barrel in the South Atlantic, for practice.

The following day, the Condors returned and met with some success. A near miss damaged the British India ship *Warfield*, a ship that had survived the last year and a half of the 1914/18 War and most of the Second World War, so badly that she fell out of the convoy and sank. Fortunately, only two of the ninety-six lives on board were lost. Three other ships, *Ocean Faith*, *Baron Fairlie* and *Factor* were damaged and fell away in the care of the salvage vessel *Salvonia*. *Ocean Faith* rejoined the convoy next day, but the other two never caught up. By then, the convoy was out of range of German aircraft, and *Scylla* dashed off at full speed for Gibraltar. More escorts arrived to protect the Gibraltar section of the convoy while we, Africa bound, were covered by the 38th Escort Group led by the sloop *Enchantress*.

Day by day the convoy, plodding along at its stately seven knots, rolled southward in glorious weather, which got warmer as the northern latitude got less, and the threat of air attacks faded as Europe was left behind leaving the escorts to devote their whole attention to the ever present danger of submarines lying in wait along the well established convoy route to Freetown in Sierra Leone. Off, a long way off, Cape St. Vincent, the KMS 23 part of the convoy peeled off

and headed eastwards leaving the remaining four columns in the care of *Neleus*, the major part of the escort going with the Mediterranean ships. Many a ship had been lost in the Freetown convoys, and many a sailor, whether he had experienced a sinking or not, slept fully dressed in his clothes. We lads knew we were immortal, and it was hot, so we turned in in our pyjamas each night when we came off watch, confident that we would sleep undisturbed. The confidence of youth is unbounded else the world would surely grind to a halt. Quite deliberately, the convoy kept out of sight of land lest hostile eyes see it and report its passage to Admiral Doenitz and his henchmen. So we passed by the Azores, and Madeira, and the Canaries and the Cape Verde Islands with never a sight of any of them. The first landfall for we first trippers was still many a thousand miles away.

Shortly after, the convoy passed Dakar and began to inch eastwards round the bulge of Africa, the ships bound for South America, and there were few of us, were detached to proceed independently at our best speed, without escort, to our destinations. Though we were steering virtually identical courses, we were soon out of sight of one another, for a one knot difference in speed will achieve that in half a day. Alone, without the comfort of other ships and escorts, the lookout was intensified, and there was a certain feeling of exposure even though it felt good to be hurtling along at twelve knots instead of meandering along at seven. Hurtling along in silence, for the triple expansion steam engine is the quietest means of propulsion yet devised by man. Diesels have an all-pervading chug, turbines whine, and sailing vessels creak and groan as the wind moans in the rigging. But the triple expansion steam engine, of which *Antilochus* had two, is silent.

You can't teach anyone to steer in convoy, so, during our solo passage of the two Atlantics to Uruguay, Mr. Gatt added that to our education. Steering *Antilochus* was heavy work, for her gear was not the modern hydraulic telemotor passing the helmsman's instructions by varying the pressure in small diameter oil pipes, but, instead, it required the physical act of moving a series of chains and rods stretching from the wheel on the bridge to the steering engine in the counter more than three hundred feet away. And to add to that the ship had twin screws, and twin screw ships are harder to steer than single screw vessels for quite small differences in revolutions on each screw can create turning moments, which have to be corrected by the quartermaster. Even so it was a job we all liked for it was proper sailor's work, and was a challenge that we enjoyed meeting. It gives a lad enormous satisfaction to keep a ship on course for an hour or more, anticipating her next digression and meeting it before it happens, for that is the secret of successful steering. If you let the ship stray before you act, the wake will be a gently waving line, unpleasing to the mate on watch.

Antilochus' cargo, besides soda ash and whisky and other general cargo, included thousands of tons of coal filling all the lower holds except numbers one and seven. Loaded in the rain at Barry, it spontaneously combusted and began to smoulder as we passed into the South Atlantic, a fact made apparent by the

trickle of smoke issuing from the ventilators. There was nothing to be done about it other than to hope that the fire didn't get too bad at sea, or become uncontrollable when the hatches were opened to discharge the cargo. So on we steamed, with smoke coming from the ventilators as well as from the funnel.

We crossed the equator; the first time for the three of us. Neptune did not come aboard, so there were no ceremonies. Indeed, the only line crossing certificate that I possess was issued by KLM in the nineteen seventies! Merchant ships, particularly in wartime, did not act out the ancient rituals unless they had passengers aboard who had to be entertained by the jolly tar's primitive customs. Five days later, off Rio but well out of sight of land, we crossed the Tropic of Capricorn and sailed out of the tropics. The weather stayed glorious, and, as night fell four days later, we saw the lights of Montevideo brightening the western sky, the first city lights that we first trippers had seen since the war began. We were astonished.

In the following dawn, we embarked the pilot for Montevideo at the entrance to the channel, and, with Cyril on the bridge keeping the log of the engine movements, *Antilochus* steamed past the shattered burned out wreck of the *Graf Spee* and into the docks of Montevideo, to berth alongside and discharge the small amount of cargo which we had for that port. Our first passage, for you can't really count the abortive Liverpool-Clyde trip, of our first voyage was complete.

South America

So there we were, three schoolboys who had grown up a bit in the last six weeks and all agog at arriving at their first foreign port. As green as grass and with no idea at all of what to expect or how to deal with the prospect of going ashore in a strange country without the background of foreign travel and holidays that today's teenagers take for granted. I am reminded of a passage from the first issue of the magazine of the British Apprentices Club in New York, dated December 1921. The club was founded by two New York ladies as a gesture of appreciation of the treatment of young American soldiers in Britain during the First World War. After an analysis of the type of lad who goes to sea as an apprentice, it refers to the fate of apprentices in New York before the club's foundation in these terms:

"Lying in our docks for weeks without personal friends, with no knowledge of the town, and by wise provision without money to spend (since they are confronted as a rule by the worst and wickedest that the town has to show) they have sailed away at last, generations of them, glad to shake off the dust of an unlovely America".

Not exactly our condition, for in our weeks together we had become good friends, and we did have money, for, though Alfred Holt was only paying us a pound a month, the Government was paying us five. Hardly riches, but we could get by on it.

But still and all we were just boys facing the new prospect with a mixture of excitement and nervousness, though it has to be said that the former outweighed the latter by a substantial margin. And our sheer innocence worked in our favour letting all the very detailed talk we heard, from the sailors and DEMS gunners about what they were going to do with the tarts and Judys they were hastening ashore to seek out, flow, half absorbed, past our ears.

Antiochus wasn't long in Montevideo, but on a bright sunny afternoon the three of us put on our best uniforms and strolled down the gangway to see the town. We were berthed relatively close to the city, so we were able to walk there from the docks, admiring the broad palm lined streets, marvelling at the traffic and astonished by the opulence of the peacetime shops. We didn't have long for our expedition, no time for cinemas or any such entertainment, so we just strolled about enjoying the novelty of the whole thing. Even being jeered at by the *Graf Spee* sailors from the balconies of their internment hotel, and being spat upon by a Uruguayan who thought we were on the wrong side in the war, failed to knock us off our stride though both experiences were entirely unexpected. And, despite the fact that there was a war on and we were a belligerent nation, we, as did all merchant seamen, went ashore without passports for we had none, though we may well have had our British identity cards, for that was the only form of identification that we had. We didn't even have the universal standby, the driving

licence; we weren't old enough to qualify. The only identification the locals were interested in was cash!

Back on board, off with the finery and into the dungarees and to work. The ship was working cargo through the night, and we were set to cargo watching in two holds, two lads to a hold working shifts. Now cargo watching is perhaps second only to cleaning bilges in the apprentice's scale of occupational undesirability. It is tedious in the extreme and is an almost entirely useless occupation, for what the dockers want to steal they will, regardless. Two of us were, one at a time, down number nine hatch. What we were watching I can't remember, but it can't have been the soda ash in bags that we were discharging. This created a fine alkali haze, which obscured the view and was very hard on the throat. Whatever we were watching was for Buenos Aires, so we weren't to be let off with being hawk eyed just in Montevideo.

The pilot came with the morning to take us across the River of Silver to Buenos Aires, a passage of some one hundred and twenty miles through the dredged channel, a dozen hours or more depending on the depth of water in the channel and the traffic. The channel is marked by buoys bearing the letters "MOP", which probably has something to do with Montevideo and Plata but which we were reliably informed stood for "Manana o Pasado" or, being translated, "Tomorrow or the day after", in line with South America's predilection for procrastination.

Off the port of Buenos Aires *Antilochus* anchored, awaiting a berth. Launches were laid on to land those who wanted to go ashore, and, as there was no cargo being worked, we four joined them, an expedition which sticks in my mind very clearly. It was night, and we went to the pictures to see Bob Hope in "The Road to Morocco", a welcome diversion from looking at the sea or inhaling soda ash. Returning to the ship late at night our sexual education was continued; not, this time, "what I'll do" but post coital "what I did". Innocence being chipped away. What would our mothers have made of it?

At Buenos Aires we first went alongside the wharf at the power station where we were to discharge our cargo of peacefully smoking coal. In those days, Argentina had neither coalmines nor oil wells, the *raison d'être* of the "coal out grain home" tramp trade between Argentina and South Wales. With that disrupted by the war, the power station had been burning the grain, which couldn't be shipped to Europe, and it was heaped up in the coal stockyards. *Antilochus* to the rescue. Mr. Gatt was biting his fingernails as the hatches came off, hoping that the increased supply of air wouldn't cause the fire to burn brightly and get out of hand, which it didn't, and our discharge of the cargo went virtually without incident unless the bucket that Cyril lost counts as such.

One of our jobs in port was finding the salinity of the water and reading the draft fore and aft twice each day. The draft and salinity when brought together in calculation allowed the mate to work out the tonnage discharged or loaded each

day and so, in the case of loading, decide how much more could be loaded to bring the ship “down to her marks”. The getting of the draft required a simple walk along the quay to look at the marks at stem and stern. The salinity involved getting a bucket of seawater from over the side and floating a hydrometer in it. Cyril’s knot, one day, was insecure, and the heaving line came up without the bucket that had preceded it over the side. And Cyril the senior midshipman. Shame on him; what an example to set to the kids!

Once the coal was out, we moved to a general cargo wharf, more accessible to the city, and we began, once the cargo watching ceased and we were put on day-work with the sailors, to enjoy our evenings ashore in the city. Though Argentina was basically sympathetic to the German cause, there was a very large and active Anglophile community, which, as there were no military or naval or air force people to lavish kindness on, took us to their hearts. The lynchpin of the effort, as far as we were concerned, was The Missions to Seamen whose chaplain at the time was one Canon Hall who made it a real centre for people like us. John fell in love with the Canon’s adopted daughter, Ginger, which perhaps got us privileges which we didn’t deserve but which helped us to have a wonderful time. We had many a visit to people’s homes for meals and not all of our hosts were British, for I well remember dinner at the home of an Argentine furrier of German extraction. But the meal, which has remained most vividly in my memory and which will be there forever, was the occasion when Canon Hall took the four of us out for dinner at a very up-market restaurant called “La Cabana”. Remember that we were fresh from wartime rationed Britain and understand what a shock to the system the serving of enormous platters of mixed grill, each item of which represented a month’s meat ration, was. We had no difficulty in doing it justice, slicing away with the sheath knife like tools provided to us.

On another occasion, two of us were taken, on a Saturday afternoon, to the Hurlingham Club in the suburbs to watch, guess what, polo. It was a glorious day, and the whole scene was beyond any experience of ours hitherto with probably the best polo teams in the world playing before an audience of the better heeled of Buenos Aries society, including President Pedro Ramirez.

Our daily work was mostly that highly educational standby of generations of ship’s mates with green apprentices to employ, chipping and painting. Bang away at the rust with a chipping hammer, wire brush the resultant bare metal, slap on a coat of red lead and return the next day with the grey paint pot. By now we had done enough of it not to raise blisters, but it was tedious work; the electric chipping hammer was away in the future. The deck of our accommodation got its daily scrubbing so that it gleamed pristine white, and our furniture got a rudimentary dusting. Spring-cleaning usually followed coaling which made it essential were we not to go about like blackamoors in the following days.

When all the cargo was out of the ship, we worked at and learned the tasks to be

completed prior to loading a homeward cargo. A cargo of cases of mixed sizes, or of cases and bales, or of bales even of identical sizes is separated by bamboo mats and planks of wood known as dunnage, both to separate one lot from another and to level the stow. In the course of loading a cargo and then discharging it, the dunnage gets split and fractured, and, at the end of the day, some is worth keeping for the next load and some, the majority, is not and has to be identified and sent ashore as scrap. In less opulent ships than *Antilochus*, dunnage was also used to line the sides of the hold, to keep the cargo out of the spaces between the frames and away from the shell plating. *Antilochus* was fitted with permanent dunnage in the form of a "spar ceiling", which remained in place voyage after voyage.

Who better, when the dunnage was sorted and the gash sent ashore, to sweep out and clean the holds than the apprentices? And who better to do the muckiest job of all, cleaning the bilges? In the majority of ships the bilges run fore and aft along the outer edges of the holds and are covered by boards which can be lifted to make them accessible for cleaning, but, in *Antilochus*, they took the form of wells, athwartships troughs running across the fore and after ends of the holds with perforated plating fixed above them, only parts of which were removable for access. Into these wells drained any water that found its way into the holds by condensation, or through the ventilators or, in extreme cases, through the hatch covers, taking with it any detritus lying about the floor of the hold. If these wells were not cleared, they couldn't be pumped clear of water so, after each cargo, they had to be inspected, cleared, and the pumping system tested.

It was a filthy and claustrophobic job. After a grain cargo, there would be rotting and fermenting grain mixed with ordinary dirt and water. In our case there was coal dust, soda ash and other assorted dirt mixed with the water. One lad, Cyril, of course, for he was the senior, had the best job up on deck hauling up and tipping overboard the buckets of filth provided by the others, one of whom would be in the hold providing buckets to the third and tying filled buckets to the line to the deck. The third poor soul would be in the well, inserting himself through the hole provided for access and then worming his way along the well with a small shovel and a bucket, cleaning out the muck. Only when the well was clear of any substantial rubbish could it be flooded and pumped clear. Most apprentices would agree that this was one of the worst jobs on offer.

In the evenings our social life revolved round the Mission where there was dancing, with girls, most evenings. Once acquainted with them, the prospect of trips to the pictures with them rather than with fellow sailors opened up, with park benches to follow were the weather suitable. We weren't drinkers at that age in that era, nor did we hustle the girls into bed, as would be the norm today, but, all in all, we did enjoy ourselves.

John has a theory that, because of the prevailing pro-German sentiment, we were forbidden to go ashore in uniform, a theory that is less than totally credible,

for, firstly, the only photograph extant of us ashore in Buenos Aires is a newspaper cutting showing we four midshipmen in uniform at the British Embassy, to which we had been invited for drinks. And secondly I don't think we had any civvies with us, they weren't on Alfred Holt's clothing list. Most likely we were warned to cover our uniforms with raincoats.

Be that as it may, John recalls being dared by Ginger to cross Buenos Aires in uniform by public transport, getting lost in the docks and accosting a chap in a scruffy mac to ask for information only to find that it was Captain Howe. The Captain thought it was a great joke, and the joke went the rounds of the ship with Captain Howe completely overlooking the blatant uniform.

Cyril got himself arrested taking gramophone records ashore to play to his girlfriend, being sprung a few hours later by the Consul. At the time he was smuggling tobacco ashore, which he stuffed down the back seat of the police car. One wonders when or if they ever found it.

With the outward cargo out, we moved to another berth to load for home, and the ship immediately became a great deal less habitable because of the nature of the cargo. Thousands of tons of wet hides, pickled in brine and stinking to high heaven; thousands of tons of dried blood and bone meal, only marginally less odorous. A quantity of timber, Quebracho, a wood so hard that nails could not be driven into it. Case upon case of corned beef; one hopes the tins were wet hide stink-proof. *Antilochus* had no freezer capacity so we carried no untinned meat. Day after day, the malodorous cargo came aboard; day after day, we read the increasing draft until, one day, with the ship loaded to the hatchbeams, we read the final draft, a mean thirty-two feet. *Antilochus* was down to her marks and ready for the passage home, via Freetown.

We bade farewell to Buenos Aires and all the friends we had made there, our first, bar the brief call at Montevideo, foreign port.

Buenos Aires to Freetown

The first leg of the passage to Freetown, where we would join a homeward bound convoy, was across the River Plate to Montevideo. The channel was dredged to thirty-two feet, and *Antilochus* was drawing that. Worse yet, the wind was westerly and had been for several days, blowing the water out of the estuary.

So, though those who had been to Pangbourne were derided by Conways as “having learned to heave the lead into a flower pot”, we found ourselves taking turns in the chains heaving it into the River Plate, for *Antilochus* had no echo sounder. The ship sailed steadily eastwards along the channel leaving a wake of Argentinean mud until, on an ebbing tide and the lead showing “and a half, five” the pilot hauled us out of the channel, and we ran gently aground to await the flood. Never have I been nearer to being sea (?) sick, for the breeze was light, and the miasma of wet hides dried blood and bone meal almost did what the sea never managed. After a few hours, *Antilochus* floated again and continued on her way to Montevideo. It is only a hundred and twenty miles from Buenos Aires to Montevideo, a stroll, which should have taken little more than half a day, but we managed to spend two whole days at it.

We were six days in Montevideo, but recollections of the place are minimal; perhaps we were sated by the fleshpots of Buenos Aires; perhaps we had simply run out of money, which is highly likely, but we didn't rate Montevideo with Buenos Aires. How could we, having just had the times of our young lives in the Argentinean port. The only excitement was passing again, close to, the wreck of the *Graf Spee* as we left and made our way eastwards towards the South Atlantic. It made the jeering of the incarcerated crew tolerable. We gave up chipping paint and went back to watches on the bridge, keeping a lookout, (and learning the business of a seaman....), for that ocean had been a happy hunting ground not only for submarines but for surface raiders as well. We were not to know that the last loss to one of those had occurred in 1942, so we were well instructed in the importance of keeping a good lookout and, as we approached Freetown, a better one, for, as a convoy assembly port, its approaches were a natural hunting ground for submarines. Nor were we to know that the last ship to be lost in the war anywhere nearby was the motor ship *Waipara*, sunk by a submarine off Bathurst (Banjul) on 16th July 1943.

The fifteen days at sea from Montevideo to Freetown illustrated the dramatic difference between the life of an apprentice in wartime and that in peacetime. In the main we spent our time watchkeeping, a euphemism for keeping a lookout, for shipmasters, when sailing unescorted, had something of an obsession with that task. In *Antilochus*, with a master and mates who took an interest in “the boys” it wasn't as simple and boring as it might otherwise have been, for we were given an introduction to the tasks that kept the mate on watch in a cargo ship occupied. The rules for the prevention of collision at sea, knowledge of which

was a key element of preparation for the second mate's exam, got no practical demonstration, for the mere sight of a puff of smoke had us off in the opposite direction as fast as we could go, but we did get instructed in them. Particularly by the third and fourth mates who, with very new tickets and still knowing all thirty two articles of The Rules for the Prevention of Collision at Sea word for word, were happy to show off to us.

But we were taught to and allowed to steer with the relieved helmsman switching to the lookout task. At our nautical colleges, we had handled a sextant but had never taken anything truly resembling a sight for lack, if of nothing else, of a proper horizon, so it made us feel that we were going in the right direction when we were offered the chance to use a sextant and take a sight, a sight to be worked up in our own time, off watch, of course. But under this regime there was little instruction in the "sailorising", which would have been part of the daily work of a peacetime apprentice. We, when on day-work, soojied and chipped and painted the steelwork and barberised the decks, but we didn't get practice in splicing rope and wire, in raising and lowering derricks, in servicing their blocks and tackle and the host of other jobs, which a man with a second mate's ticket ought to know as well as or better than the sailors working to the mate's orders. For me, it was to be my fourth voyage, in *Empire Splendour*, before the lamp trimmer took me in hand and taught me to be a sailor as well as a watchkeeper; he took me in hand because it was he who noticed that my bowline attaching the logline to the governor wasn't a bowline BEFORE we lost the log and took it upon himself to educate me.

The balance between using an apprentice as cheap labour and seriously teaching him the business of a ship's officer is an interesting one. It doesn't take four years to learn to chip and paint, or splice, or worm, parcel and serve and tie all the knots likely to be useful. Nor does it take that long to learn navigation and chartwork and the rule of the road and the basics of ship handling. But it does take time, though I doubt four years for both elements, to become reasonably expert. I suppose that it is the case with all apprenticeships, ashore and afloat that, with proper instruction, half the time would suffice, the other half being the employer's bonus for offering the apprenticeship. And, were it all crammed into two years, could a lad who started at sixteen and got his second mate's ticket at eighteen be regarded as a credible ship's officer? Perhaps yes, for the vast flood of Liberty ships then appearing were manned by mates with descriptions not very far from that, and they came to not too much harm.

Analysis of the morals of our education, or of the merits of the way it was being conducted or whether it was going on in the spirit of our indentures exercised us not at all. We were at sea, doing what we had always wanted to be doing and enjoying it. The weather held fair, and the passage from Montevideo to Freetown, alone and not in convoy, was entirely without incident, and fifteen days after clearing Uruguay, on 25th October, we took our pilot outside the boom defence nets at Freetown, a port popularly known as "the rear end of the Empire"

with good reason, for, though it was a great natural harbour and though the town derived considerable importance from that, it was, from the sailor's point of view, a very hot and sticky place to hang about waiting for a convoy to assemble. The town, though the capital of Sierra Leone, was an overgrown shantytown whose purpose was to use the natural harbour to get out the products of the hinterland. So there were only two things a sailor could possibly want to go ashore for, and you were at the mercy of the bumboat crews on the passage to and fro, especially if returning with impaired facilities.

We were there for some days while ships arrived from South America, South and East Africa, India, the Persian Gulf and the Middle East to get the protection of the homeward convoy. The days were very hot and the humidity close to a hundred percent, and the nights, brilliantly lit by incessant thunderstorms, were barely cooler than the days. The rain, when it came, which was frequently, was torrential; rain the like of which we had never seen before. Chipping paint was a sweaty business.

The up and coming anti-aircraft weapon, which was being supplied to more and more merchant ships, (those guns left over from the Liberty ship programme, for they carried eight apiece) was the Oerlikon 20 mm cannon, a most excellent and versatile gun. The Navy had set up a gunnery school at Freetown to train sailors in its use, and Mr. Gatt arranged for we four apprentices to go on the three day Oerlikon course. This was our only trip away from the ship at Freetown and a great outing it was.

The mornings were spent in a marquee having the gun explained to us and in instruction in things like changing the magazine and dealing with stoppages and in the theory and use of the cartwheel sight. Then there was a break for a swim off a glorious white sandy beach, taking no heed of warnings of the Barracuda, which has a fancy for the dangly bits, followed by a not bad lunch. Then we took turns at actually firing the gun at a drogue towed behind an aeroplane. I hope the pilot was suitably rewarded with medals for bravery, for we were all first timers, and it was a lethal weapon. In anger it fired explosive shells, but we at Freetown were using plain lead, a 20 mm chunk of which is dangerous enough without the added benefit of explosives. We were more than grateful to Mr. Gatt for realizing that this was a skill that we simply had to acquire. It easily beat chipping paint.

All in all, we had three great days. *Antilochus* had only two Oerlikon guns, and the leading seaman in charge of the DEMS gunners had more sense than to let us fire them in anger. That was reserved for his experts who had probably done a four day course!

As the convoy gathered in the enormous anchorage, the bumboats came alongside to trade with the sailors. Apart from watches, lighters and all the toys, which were standard then as now, there were coconuts, bananas and monkeys.

We thought a monkey would make a nice pet and made a deal for one at a cost of one loaf of bread, which we placed in a basket and lowered over the side. On its arrival in the boat, the trader decided that it was a pedigree monkey and worth two loaves, not one. So John told him to put the loaf back in the basket, and we hauled it up, whereupon John got a knife, cut it in two and sent it back down to the boat. To our surprise the trader accepted our two half-sized loaves and up came the monkey.

Would that it hadn't. It wasn't the friendly little animal that we had expected but a really vicious little beast that would bite you as soon as look at you and which did notable damage to the furnishings of the half deck, quite apart from the mess which resulted from it not being house trained. I think it lasted a day, after which we didn't sell it back to the trader, we gave it back to him. I wonder how many ships the little beast spent a day in?

Bananas were another purchase. By 1943, the younger people at home had read about them in books and had even seen pictures of them but they had never seen, handled or tasted a real banana, so it was a challenge to convoys homeward bound from Freetown to try to get some home. It was an almost impossible task in a seven knot convoy, for, the first couple of weeks of the homeward passage being in hot weather, the fruit ripened too fast even though bought green. The received wisdom was that, hung in a ventilator shaft in an airflow, they ripened less fast, so space in ventilators was at a premium. But it was all relative, and though they may have ripened less fast it was still too fast, and they were either eaten, or black, by the time they got home. Probably only those lucky enough to sail in reefer ships, or chief stewards with access to refrigerators, ever got any bananas home though even the latter would have a struggle. The carrying temperature for the fruit is fifty-three degrees Fahrenheit, and ship's fridges are a lot colder than that.

The only *Antilochus* bananas which got home were a few belonging to Mr. Graham, the second mate, who shut them in an empty ammunition locker on the bridge and just left them there for the voyage.

We, brilliant, fresh out of school genii, decided that the thing to do was to mash them into a mush and bottle the mush in kilner jars excluding all the air. I don't know how many bananas we mashed or how many jars we filled, but we did just that and lodged them on the top of the half deck bookcase, which had a good rim round it. The first day out of Freetown, the first jar exploded, splattering our home with noxious slime, and we ditched the rest forthwith, thereafter maintaining that one exploded on the way down and sank a submarine!

Day by day, as we went about our work of chipping, painting, soojing and occasionally keeping part of an anchor watch, the vast open expanse of water became less open as ships dribbled in from all over the world; grey, battered ships sporting unsightly life rafts mounted on slides and bedecked with concrete

gun pits here and there. Most ships had a four-inch or similar gun and a twelve-pounder on the poop; the better armed had a few Oerlikon cannon for anti-aircraft use as well. The universal grey may have hidden company colours, but the very shapes of the ships beneath their concrete bridge armour and anti-torpedo net booms shouted their ownerships to the experienced. War built "Empire", "Fort", and "Ocean" had their own distinctive silhouettes. Yet the most distinctive was the shape of the "Liberty" ship with its compact single bridge and accommodation block. Even as late as the Autumn of 1943 they were a rarity in British convoys other than those on the North Atlantic even though one thousand eight hundred and forty of them had been built by the end of that year. Not only was their silhouette distinguished by the single deckhouse amidships, but they bristled with weaponry; as well as their eight Oerlikon cannon they had four-inch guns or the like fore and aft. In the American ships the basic crew of forty-five was supplemented by an "Armed Guard" of thirty-six gunners. Both Ian Todd and I were later to sail, at different times, in *Samcree*, a Liberty ship built in 1943.

Fundamental to the sailing of the northbound convoy was the provision of the escort and for that we had to wait for the arrival of a southbound convoy dispersing off Freetown to release the warships to guard us. Our protectors came in early in November, refuelled, had a day or two making good the ravages of the outward passage and prepared to take us home. The day came when the masters of all the merchant ships to form the convoy were called ashore for the convoy conference at which they would learn the format of the convoy, its proposed route, the strength and make up of the escort and the particular foibles of its senior officer and a vast body of other essential information including forecasts of hazards along our homeward path. That which in fact did the damage to the convoy wasn't mentioned. At the time, its existence was unknown.

On 2nd November 1943, at dawn, the anchorage spilled its contents ship by ship single file through the gate in the boom defence and out into the Atlantic. Masters consulted the diagram showing the station of every ship in the convoy and manoeuvred their vessels into their appointed places. By evening, the armada was more or less in order and steaming on a northwesterly course at a stately six and a half knots with each ship's mate of the watch fiddling with the engine revolutions, getting used to the work again after a month or months of independent sailing since the last convoy. It was an impressive spectacle; large convoys always were.

Passage Home

We still carried with us the glorious weather that we had enjoyed since reaching the Clyde in July. We were fit, well fed, fresh from the fleshpots of a neutral country and the company of many very pleasant people. I suppose we were just a little too pleased with ourselves, immortal, nothing could ever go wrong. A very good condition for young men to be in, giving no thought to the changes in our circumstances lying ahead of us as *Antiochus* steamed northwards towards the European winter, towards the submarines infesting the waters from Gibraltar to the Irish Sea, towards the aircraft sitting on their runways in France awaiting the opportunity to spot us for their comrades in the Kriegsmarine or, as they hoped, to add some of us to their own tally of images painted on the sides of their aircraft. Young immortals don't look to the future if it looks like that.

Instead we went back to our daily tasks, watchkeeping again, signalling, lookout and helping the mate with the station keeping, just the rudimentary use of the sextant on the ship ahead's mainmast to see if we were running up on her or falling behind. The daily routine of signals from the Commodore had to be dealt with, and, never mind his Royal Naval signals staff, we weren't going to be out-flagged by them. At about the time each day that we expected the rendezvous for the day after tomorrow signal, our HP3 hoist was already bent on, ready for a swift response, and the flags for our guesses for the degrees of latitude and longitude were ready to hand, though the flags for the minutes were not worth making a guess at. The bunting flew, the signals were logged, and we knew where the convoy was expected to be in a couple of day's time.

The escorts, corvettes and frigates, dashed or sauntered about beyond the fringes of the convoy, acting on information available to them but not to us. Ships making smoke, or straggling, were first of all told off by lamp by the Commodore then, if that didn't work, lectured at close quarters by loud hailer by an escort sent into the convoy for the purpose. Spread over square miles of ocean, the convoy responded in the stateliest possible manner to the Commodore's course change signals without ever once getting in a muddle. Of course, by that stage of the war, most of the masters and mates handling the ships were pretty experienced in convoy work though that didn't make them like it any better.

We were later led to believe that our convoy was deliberately under-escorted in the hope that the U-boats would be tempted into treating us as a soft target, then to be set upon by the escort group hovering beyond the horizon. Whether there was any truth in this tale we still don't know, but, in any event, it wasn't U-boats, but aeroplanes, that did the damage to the convoy.

Clear of Cape Verde, the convoy climbed the meridian of twenty West, degree by degree, at the rate of about two and a half a day, an inexorable movement of fifty ships and a quarter of a million tons of cargo towards that small island that

needed them so much. For the first ten days of the passage, the weather stayed as we liked it, warm, calm and sunny until, at the latitude of the Azores, high cloud obscured the sun and foretold change. From time to time, our peace and quiet was disturbed by submarine scares when we manned our four-inch gun and watched escorts dashing about flying black flags and dropping depth charges. They must have done their work well, for not a torpedo came the convoy's way, and the host of ships plodded homeward intact and relieved as each "stand to" passed without incident or damage.

Day by day, the convoy crept northwards, nearer each dawn to the range at which Condors based in France could reach out to find and harass the ships until, on 21st November, they did just that. Our escort did not include either a "MAC" ship carrying one Hurricane fighter on a catapult, which could make one flight only, or an escort carrier with a flight deck capable of operating a few Swordfish in protection of the convoy. Our little armada had to rely on its own guns and those of the escorts to keep the bombers at bay.

The early afternoon of that day was overcast but bright when a solitary Condor appeared high to the East of the ships far, far out of reach of any of our guns were they in the escorts or in the merchant ships. He dawdled about, watching us from his seat in the grand circle, circling the convoy as if counting it for a report to his underwater colleagues. But he wasn't collecting submarines, rather fellow Condors some of whom shortly joined him and, like the first-comer, dawdled about out of range. This seemed to us to be an overprovision of shadowing aeroplanes, which it would have been had they been just that, which they were not, as we were soon to discover. After a little while, as we stood to our guns and waited for the chance of a shot, an object detached itself from one of them and, in the most leisurely possible manner, turned and flew down one of the columns of ships. As the bomb, for that was what it was, approached the convoy, the hushed, fearful silence was broken as every gun that could be brought to bear, whether or not it had the range to be effective, opened fire at it, the immediate threat, not at the Condor, which was well out of range. This first bomb landed on the deck of *Marsa*, a four and a half thousand ton steamer, exploding in a burst of fire and smoke and sinking her. We had just been privileged to see one of the first uses of the radio controlled glider bomb, and we didn't like it at all.

The weapon allowed the attacking aircraft to stay comfortably out of range, release the weapon and "fly" it onto the target, which seemed to us to be a bit offside. The escorts couldn't do much about it, for corvettes had a maximum speed of sixteen knots and sloops twenty, so that was the highest speed at which they could push the screen outwards. And, if the Condors were pushed out of useful range, they could, in minutes, simply fly to the other side of the convoy and start again.

Throughout the afternoon, we saw a number of these released and flown up the

columns of the convoy, for, ships being longer than they are wide, the chance of a hit was greater flown that way than had they been flown across the columns. As sight setter on our guns, I had little to do when the twelve-pounder anti-aircraft gun was in use, and I was scared stiff when one of these little weapons came gliding up our column to fall, fortunately, in the sea astern of us as every weapon in every ship around us blasted away at it in the attempt to destroy it before it hit anything.

But for shooting the gliders down, there wasn't much defence against them. As the afternoon wore on, ships in the target column began to alter course to port or to starboard to put themselves out of line, but the room for manoeuvre was very limited by the ships on either side, and, anyway, the bombs were steerable and not committed to one course on leaving the aircraft. Which is better, to be able to see the weapon trying to do you harm, or not? I think not. At the time, none of us gave heed to the idea that, just as our shipmasters were urgently thinking of the best evasion measures, so were the aviators learning to fly their remote chicks, to judge height and distance and to work out how to land the things on decks instead of in the sea.

The ship on our starboard beam in the next column was not so lucky. She was Lamport and Holt's motor ship *Delius*, a modern six thousand ton vessel. One of the bombs was flown at her from ahead and landed on the foredeck, killing everyone on the bridge and leaving her under the command of the third mate. As she fell astern of the convoy, a doctor was transferred to her from a corvette to tend the many injured, and, the next day, she was provided with officers from the sunken *Marsa*. She was kept afloat by the desperate efforts of her crew who, after the first night when they thought that they had put out the fire in number three 'tween deck, found that a red hot shard had gone down a ventilator and set the cotton in the lower hold on fire. All night, they pumped water down the ventilator, bringing the fire under control but giving the ship a dangerous list to starboard. So pumping the water out began, a task made more difficult by the peanuts in the cargo floating about and blocking the strum boxes. In an attempt to put the fire out without using too much water, the engineers drilled holes in the bulkhead between the engine room and number three hold and forced steam through them. Despite the continuing fire, the stability problems, the floating peanuts and despite having no compass other than the ones in the lifeboats, faulty steering gear and two of the engine's six cylinders out of action, *Delius* regained the convoy and was brought home.

The afternoon wore on. The aircraft carried only one bomb apiece and could not, therefore, deliver a fusillade, but it was evening, an evening bringing a lowering sky and an increasing wind born of a depression lurking out to the West, before the last of them delivered itself of its chick and made for home.

We were three lucky young men. That was the only occasion when any of us was actually attacked. And the submarine danger was lessening as the war ran

its course.

This affray in latitude 46° 46' North and longitude 18° 30' West was our last encounter with the enemy during that voyage, if you exclude a diversion to avoid submarines in the Bristol Channel, submarines which neither the escort nor the convoy encountered and so counting as a threat rather than a hazard. By now, the depression, deepening as it moved eastwards out of the mid-Atlantic, took a hand and destroyed one of our youthful illusions, the idea that seafaring is an exclusively fair weather occupation. Hour by hour, the wind increased, watch by watch, the sea state climbed up through Admiral Beaufort's scale; the wind progressed through a moderate breeze to a fresh breeze, "most advantageous for sailing with a leading wind and all sail drawing", on through forces six and seven when "reduction of sail becomes necessary with a leading wind" and into forces eight and nine, fresh gale and strong gale, "considerable reduction of sail necessary even with the wind quartering". Those ancient notations were wholly inappropriate to a nine thousand ton steamship, so, by that time, rather than recording reductions of sail the log read "heavy sea and swell, vessel rolling and pitching heavily and shipping water overall".

The last part of the description of our conditions almost brought an early end to John's active life. While he was negotiating the open deck between the bridge structure and the fore end of the central block of accommodation, a wave broke aboard and flung a liferaft, a massive thing some twelve feet square and three or four feet deep, across the deck, fetching up against a pair of ventilators by the scuppers. Fortunately, from John's point of view, the front edge of the wave caught him first and flung him behind the same two ventilators, saving him from an extremely serious accident. A wet and shaken John retired to the half deck, got himself dried off and changed and went in to enjoy a hearty dinner.

The grey skies lowered themselves almost down to the ocean as the wind increased to a strong gale and the convoy laboured past the Scillies with station keeping becoming more difficult by the hour. There were submarines reported in the St. George's Channel, so the whole convoy, not just the ships bound for the South Wales ports, was routed up the Bristol Channel and round Lundy Island. The westerly gale was piling up the seas as the channel narrowed between St. Gowan's Head and Hartland Point. *Antiochus* and her consorts wallowed on, and we in the half deck took what precautions we could but neither soon enough nor adequate. As the ship rounded Lundy Island, a monstrous sea came aboard filling the decks to bulwark height and flooding the main deck alleyways, flowing in over the weatherstep when one of us, unsuspecting, opened the door into the flooded alleyway. As quickly as possible we lifted our trunks off the deck and stowed them on the bunks, all but Cyril's, which went on the table top, only to be rolled off, spilling its contents, which included several pounds of flour, part of his food parcel for home, into the swilling sea water. The packets burst and compounded our cleanup problems!

Cyril had seen weather like this before, old seadog that he was, so he didn't join the three tyros kneeling on the settee, faces glued to the portholes, fascinated by and in awe of the wild scene outside. But he didn't let us do that for long for there was HIS mess to clear up, and who better to do it than his juniors, so he soon had us hard at work. Salt water and hot steam pipes make enough mess, but add flour and you have the makings of a disaster.

Little things like being washed out of our home didn't interrupt the business of watchkeeping, but the clean up occupied most of our spare time for the rest of the voyage. But it did have one beneficial result.

Alfred Holt's midshipmen were, at the beginning of each voyage, set what was known as "office work" to do during the trip. This comprised an essay on a specified subject and exercises in the various branches of navigation, algebra, trigonometry, both plane and spherical, and all the other subjects that we would encounter when we came to sit our second mate's tickets. As is the way of boys, too much of it was left 'till the last minute, and many an essay has been scribbled between Point Lynas and the Bar Lightship. But, having been flooded, we were able to persuade Mr. Gatt that some of our completed work had been washed away or washed out. I doubt that he believed that it had ever been done, but he supported our claim and the missing work brought no reprisals.

As the ships gained the Irish Sea, the gale moderated, but not so much as to allow us to pick up the pilot at Moelfre without anchoring for the night in the shelter of Anglesey, where one of us did his best to do what the Condors had failed to do, destroy the ship. The gale was bitterly cold, and we were keeping anchor watches with the mates on the bridge. One of our tasks was to keep the saloon stove alight and stoked up. Now the flue for that stove ran up within the accommodation, through the chartroom and emerged on the monkey island. Enthusiastic stoking, and the draught induced by the gale, led to a red hot chimney in the chartroom, which came close to setting the chart table alight. They didn't teach us things like that at Pangbourne or Glasgow Nautical!

On 25th November 1943, chased along by the tail end of the gale, *Antiochus* hove up her anchor and sailed across Liverpool Bay, past the Bar Lightship and into the Queen's Channel and ultimately into the Gladstone Dock where the stink of her cargo did labour relations no good at all. We apprentices went about our end of voyage tasks, getting the wireless aerials down, clearing up the bridge, giving the flag lockers a harbour stow, packing up our kit and spring cleaning the half deck until, on 27th November, we reported to Ullet Road before being sent home on leave, catching our various trains home.

None of us ever sailed together again. John and I took our second mate's tickets together in the early summer of 1946, lodging at the Merchant Navy Officers Club, working at Liverpool Tech during the day and, after a bit of homework of an evening, going out for a pint or two or to the Rialto ballroom to dance, or both.

We took our exams the same week, and both passed, John defecting to Cunard while I went off to be third mate of *Samcree*, a Liberty ship then managed by Holts. I didn't meet Ian again till the late fifties when he was working ashore in Glasgow, and I was put in touch with him by a shipping and forwarding agent.

The three of us got together again for the first time in 1973 or 1974, when we met for dinner one evening at Rules, in Maiden Lane in London. I was on a computer course at Southend, John was an advertising tycoon, and Ian was running the London end of P & O's Australian stevedoring operation. It was to be another twenty years before we all met again.

Thereafter

Everyone who goes to sea receives a heap of advice to the effect that he is making a monumental mistake. This advice comes not from the uninformed, who see seafaring as a romantic occupation, but mainly from the informed and, in that category, mainly from those who have actually been to sea. The three young men who had just completed their first voyage had all been given their share of “don’t do it” advice and had ignored it, and all had overcome a certain amount of parental objection, some informed and some not. Parental objections fell mainly into three categories; the first being that going to sea was not a “proper job”. The second was related to that, and was valid, and was that it was an ill paid job even if the aim of being Master of a ship was achieved. The third was a purely wartime objection, that it was a dangerous occupation and that to embark upon it before the age of call up into the forces was unwise.

Believing ourselves to be immortal, the third objection had carried no weight when we joined *Antiochus* and, despite our limited encounter with the hazards of war, still carried no weight when we returned to Liverpool. Despite the statistical evidence, I believe that all sailors in wartime felt that they would be far more at risk fighting in the army on land than they were sailing in lightly armed merchant ships at sea. We had a bunk to retire to each night or part of night, whereas soldiers had to sleep in trenches, in the open, and in all sorts of hostile environments.

War has been described as long periods of boredom interspersed with short periods of frightening, dangerous activity. Seafaring, as a merchant officer, could be described as long periods of boredom interspersed with bouts of very hard work often in extremely uncongenial conditions, and other difficult periods conducting the ship through narrow and often crowded waters. At the end of the first voyage, during which all was new and everything was to be learned, only the most perspicacious would recognise the threat of boredom. Of the three of us, only one, John, did. The two lads completed the voyage with no doubt that their lives would be seafaring ones.

The unspoken objection to a seafaring life, that it was not conducive to a happy and stable married life, weighed with us not at all, for, though there were girl friends at home and abroad, marriage was seen as a state for very much older men and not to be taken into account at this time, or possibly ever. We were innocent, in many more ways than one.

So what became of these three dashing young sailors? First John, the second youngest, who, by the beginning of that first voyage, was beginning to have doubts.

John stayed with Blue Funnel until 1946 when he sat for and passed his second mate’s exam. Coincidentally I was ashore for the same exam at the same time;

we lodged at the Merchant Navy Officers Club, went to the same Liverpool Technical College to study for it, took the exams the same week and both passed with the minimum of cheating. The Morse code tutor was a retired naval signalman, and it was well known that, in the last exercise before the exam, he sent, as an exercise, the message upon which he would examine us. John was nearly caught out for, in his enthusiasm, he was writing the message ahead of the light. All slightly irrelevant, for the five letter groups were much more difficult, and we had no foreknowledge of them. Though we spent weekends in each other's homes in Lancashire and Cheshire, that was to be the last that I saw of John for ten years.

With his shiny new second mate's ticket, John quit Alfred Holt and joined Cunard. He felt that in passenger ships the boredom would be relieved and, being already interested in writing, hoped that that could be married to a career in passenger ships, but it was not to be. John found the life constricting and boring and, after a few voyages with Cunard, came ashore shortly after the end of the war.

He settled down in London to be a writer and, though he had one play produced by the BBC (radio in those days) found making a living that way nigh impossible, so he set up as a freelance advertising copywriter, a job for which he had a considerable talent, for he was soon a permanency at The London Press Exchange, then one of the biggest agencies in London. There he prospered until, in his fifties, he was vice chairman of the firm, which by then was known as Leo Burnett.

In 1976, he left Leo Burnett and joined Lintas and worked and lived for a number of years in Indonesia. Returning to London as an International Director, he spent most of his time in aeroplanes. After retiring he was invited to run a company in Colombia and did that for a while. In the nineteen eighties, he finally retired to the lovely old house he had in Suffolk to create, with his wife, a most magnificent garden. What does the future hold? What when the garden becomes too much for the advancing years? Time alone will tell.

The youngest of us was Ian Todd. He came ashore from *Antilochus* with no doubts that his seafaring career would be lifelong; his enthusiasm was undiminished, and he looked forward to enjoying his leave and then joining another ship, and another, and another, among them his next ship.

In 1943, the Liberty Ship building programme was at its height. One thousand two hundred and ninety six were built that year some of which were assigned to British companies for manning and management. One of these was *Samcree*, building in Baltimore, when, on 23rd December 1943, Ian and the rest of *Samcree's* crew embarked in *Queen Elizabeth* for the passage to America. When they arrived, the ship was still on the stocks, so the crew was lodged in hotels in New York, kicking their heels. Many sought work to fill in the time, Ian among them. He got a social security card and a job as a lift attendant at Macy's

department store, a job that only lasted till Captain "Pinky" Johnstone found out about it and forbade it.

Ian spent the next two years in *Samcree*, a not very happy ship, voyaging between the East coast of America and the Indian sub-continent. Ships depend on their masters as schools depend on their headmasters for happiness and success. By contrast I spent seven very happy months as third mate of that same *Samcree* under Captain Robb in 1946/47.

Even after that long voyage, Ian hadn't enough sea time for second mate, so, after a month at the Outward Bound Sea School at Aberdovey, where Alfred Hold sent midshipmen for whom they had no ship, he made one more voyage before sitting for and passing his second mate's exam. Thereafter he went from ship to ship, from fourth to third to second mate, progressing at the right intervals of sea time to his mate's ticket, then masters, then on to extra master, a qualification rarer than a double first at Oxbridge.

In 1955, Ian made his last voyage, as chief officer of the new *Antilochus* before accepting an invitation to join James Spencer & Co, a firm of Glasgow stevedores, as a management trainee. In 1956, he married and, by 1961, was the General Manager of another Glasgow firm, shipping agents W. B. Woolley & Co. Ltd., where he was heavily involved in the development and construction of the Glasgow container terminal. But the writing was on the wall for the Scottish ports, and, in 1972, Ian applied for and got the job of managing the London office of the stevedoring arm of P & O Australia. Two years later, Ian was moved to Sydney as General Manager and was shortly appointed to the board.

A move, in 1981, to the post of Marketing Director at James Patrick & Co, the largest firm of stevedores and shipping agents in Australia, at a time of stiffening competition in every branch of the business came next, and Ian spent the next few years building business around the Pacific Rim. In 1990, after a takeover by disinterested outsiders, Ian was retired early at the age of 63. By then he had one daughter, married, in Australia and another, also married, in London, and he and his wife Myra upped stakes and retired to a handsome converted dairy in Tiverton in Devon.

Ian was the only one of the three to remain in contact with the sea and shipping throughout his working life.

Last, the other Ian, marginally the oldest of the three. At the end of the *Antilochus* voyage, my hopes and ambitions remained intact. I had no thoughts of anything other than a seagoing career for life. I went home on leave, had a tale to tell, got a small petrol ration as did all merchant seamen, enjoyed my leave and went back to Birkenhead to join *Teucer*, a sister ship to *Antilochus*. *Teucer* sailed for Alexandria on Christmas Eve 1943 and spent Christmas day anchored at the Liverpool bar awaiting the gathering of the convoy. After

Alexandria, she went to North Africa and Canada before returning to Liverpool.

A month at the Outward Bound School at Aberdovey to cure my communist tendencies preceded a voyage in *Bellerophon*, another sister of *Antilochus*, and the last for there were only three left afloat, round Africa including a call at St. Helena. Then a voyage to Halifax and back in *Glaucus* and then off in *Empire Splendour* for a year's voyage to Australia, the Middle East, India, the Middle East and home by way of Trieste. The third mate was Australian and decided to stay at home and Captain Simpson gave me his job in Adelaide.

I got my second mate's ticket after that voyage and then spent seven months as third mate of *Samcree* and thirteen months in *Ajax* by which time I had the sea time for the first mate's exam, which I took and passed before resigning from Alfred Holt & Co.

Why? I had no other career in mind and was very happy in my seafaring work. Family pressure is the answer. My uncle Jack, by then a master in Burmah Oil, had always campaigned against my going to sea, and I well remember going into my father's office in Liverpool at the end of the *Ajax* voyage and being asked "when are you going to get a proper job?" and thinking that an odd question, for I thought I had one. Then there was my family's and my recently married sister's very attractive lifestyles based, of course, on far higher incomes than I was ever to earn; it all added up to pressure that I failed to resist.

With no idea what I wanted to do, I was persuaded that Chartered Accountancy was a worth while and profitable profession, signed yet another set of articles, and qualified in 1953. By the end of that year, married and with a son and unable to screw a decent salary out of Cooper Brothers, I applied for and got the job of Chief Accountant at Gardiner of Selkirk Ltd., a tweed mill in the Scottish Borders.

I started there on 1st January 1954, progressed to the board, became a part owner, retired at the age of sixty in 1986, and we managed to sell the business in 1988, completing the retirement package.

In that span of time I met John occasionally when I visited London. I was put in touch with Ian when he was working in Glasgow and met him there and at Helensburgh where he lived. In 1974, the three of us met for dinner in London and had a most enjoyable evening. That was our last full meeting before 15th July 1993, for Ian went to Australia and got lost.

Finding Ian was a story in itself. John and I had decided to meet on 15th July 1993 and thought that it would improve the gathering by much more than fifty percent if Ian could be there too. I knew that he had gone to Australia and at one time I had his business address, but that had got lost. So I went to the Australian Consulate in Edinburgh and searched the telephone directories for all the major

ports for I. S. Todd and wrote to them all. I got several replies but a letter from Ian was not among them.

Then it occurred to me that he might have returned to Britain, so I did the same with the directories for Glasgow, Edinburgh Dundee and Aberdeen. Same result.

My next thought was that, Extra Masters being very thin on the ground, Glasgow Nautical might have some record of him, but they had not, but after a while they came back to me with the name of another Extra Master of the same vintage who had gone to Australia and set up a marine surveying business, one Captain Aiton. So back to the consulate and the telephone directories to discover his address in Cronulla. A letter to him, and a few weeks later he wrote back, giving me Ian's address in Tiverton, and we were able to make our gathering complete.

John still lives in Suffolk. I remain in Melrose, and Ian moved to Ardrishaig in Argyll, where he died in 2001.

That Reunion

Fifty years and three lifetimes on, and the reunion was about to begin.

We had chartered two rooms and a suite, a euphemism for a bedroom large enough to accommodate a set of easy chairs and a couple of tables. This was to be our headquarters; this was where the ample supply of scotch, gin, sherry and appropriate ancillary liquids was ready and waiting.

At six in the evening, as planned months earlier, we gathered and enjoyed the first drinks together for nearly twenty years, since just before Ian set off for Australia; and we talked, not at that point of times long past but mostly of our more recent activities. One drink followed another, and time went by 'till, before we knew it, it was dinner time.

So to the dining room we repaired. The hotel had been kind enough to give me the dimensions of their menu, and I had made up three menu covers to suit the occasion, which they had placed around our three menus. The cover, all done with a photocopier and transfer lettering had at its top a photograph of *Antilochus* and below that the inscription:

ANTILOCHUS

Voyage 71

Signed on 15th July 1943

FIRST TRIPPER'S DINNER

Ian Jackson

John Ormerod

Ian Todd

FIFTY YEARS ON

15th July 1993

John and Ian knew nothing of this artwork, so, when the head waiter bustled up to our table with our menus, the dinner got off to an excellent start.

The food ordered, we appointed John to be sommelier, or rather wine selector, for his experience of the high life of the advertising world most clearly fitted him for the post. But he had much to contend with in his perusal of the list for Ian launched himself into a tale of events near the end of his long voyage in

Samcree. The master was the infamous “Pinky” Johnstone, probably the most disliked master in Holt’s fleet. As the ship approached the Strait of Gibraltar, the mate, Mr. Jacques who, for the best part of two years had taken more than enough of Pinky’s unpleasantness, took to the turps and, standing on the boat deck as evening approached, espied the captain pacing the bridge. “Captain Johnstone”, he shouted, “you’re a bastard”. “What did you say Mr. Jacques” shouted Pinky. “You’re a bastard”, replied Jacques. “You must be drunk”, said Pinky. “Of course I am”, replied Jacques, “you don’t think I’d say that if I wasn’t, do you?” Jacques was put ashore in Gibraltar.

With all this going on, it took time to select the wines, but John did a fine job; they were as excellent as the food, and the service, and the dinner was most enjoyable and took quite a long time, for there was talking as well as eating to be done.

Well fed and watered, we repaired to the suite and went on talking and drinking ‘till well after midnight.

Bright and early, or nearly so, next morning we were up and breakfasting, and, when that was done, we called for a taxi to take us on a tour of the Birkenhead docks and then on to Hamilton Square and the ferry.

We should perhaps have foregone the dockland tour, for, in the East Float, the West Float and the Vittoria dock, there was not a single ship. When we had come ashore, those docks were still filled with the ships of the Blue Funnel Line, Harrisons, Clan Line, Elder Dempster and a host of other casual callers. And now it is a desert with the whole of the traffic that used to flow through those docks stuffed into containers and handled at Seaforth, on the Liverpool side of the river.

Downcast, our tour took far less time than we had anticipated, and we had three quarters of an hour to wait for the ferry. It was a glorious summer’s day so we walked up the riverside towards another reminder of past glories, Cammel Laird’s shipyard, forlorn and gathering weed, beyond which was the only ship we saw all day, a tanker berthing at Port Sunlight. Not only were the docks empty but so too was the river, which, in days of yore, would have been heaving with shipping entering and leaving the docks, returning from and setting sail for the far corners of the world. What a blow to our romanticism.

The ferry crossing was a joy, bringing back memories of trips in days long gone in the other direction, to New Brighton for dancing at the Rock ballroom and a beer or two at the Royal Rock Hotel, bringing back to mind the words of the song which begins “When I was a skivvy at the Royal Rock Hotel, washing up the dishes and answering the bell” a song which ends with “send the bugger off to sea”.

The ferry berthed at the landing stage where, long ago, great Atlantic liners used to tie up to embark and discharge passengers, a traffic now lost to Aeroplanes. I well remember a Union Castle Line advertisement just before they closed their mail service from Southampton to Capetown. It carried a picture of an aeroplane wing and some clouds above the caption "From such and such a date this is the only view you will get on your way to South Africa". What a change from their earlier standard advertisement, which read, "Every Thursday afternoon at four a Union Castle liner sails for the Cape". Changed days.

We made our way to the Albert Dock and the Maritime Museum where we spent the rest of the morning and had lunch. Ship models are a constant joy, especially when one of those on display was *Cyclops*, one of *Antiochus*' sisters and when another was *Delius*, bombed alongside us in our homeward convoy. Another lovely model was *Glenlyon*, one of the very last of the fast break-bulk cargo liners and a graceful contrast to the later, semi-container, brutal looking *Melampus*. We ambled about, watching a film of a corvette at work in an Atlantic gale through more than once and generally had a nostalgic browse.

After lunch we walked northward to the dry-docked pilot cutter *Edmund Gardner*, which we inspected with great interest, remembering the times when our ships had taken pilots from her steam driven predecessors, only Ian Todd having still been at sea when she came into service in 1953, and the times we had put our pilots down the boarding ladder and into the cutter's punt before our ships sailed for distant places. Now the pilots go out to the ships from Liverpool or Point Lynas in fast launches and are brought back the same way. No longer do they constitute a seaborne gentleman's club while living aboard the cutter awaiting a ship.

Later, walking round the Albert dock, we noticed a launch offering trips round the docks accessible from the Albert so we bought tickets and enjoyed a half hour's cruise of the southern docks. No ships, but all sorts of recreational use. A dock, which once handled ocean-going ships, has to be a very large piece of water and has to be used in some way, or be filled in. These were not the docks which Holt ships had used, those being to the north of the Pier Head, so they were not haunted for us.

The day was wearing on, so we strolled back northwards, took our lives in our hands crossing the multi-lane road and went to look at India Buildings, which used to be Holt's head office and where, once, out of our time and with a second mate's ticket or better, our appointments to ships had been made. Now there are no ships, Holts having sold their share in Overseas Containers Ltd many years ago, that their last piece of deep sea ship owning. Another hair-raising crossing of the road, and we were back at the Pier Head and the ferry. We made a longer trip of the return crossing, for the ferry went first to Rock Ferry before returning us to Woodside in the late afternoon sunshine.

We had trouble finding a taxi, but did in the end, to return to the Bowler Hat for a few ZZZs before sprucing up for the evening. Again, that followed the pattern of pre-prandial drinks, a first class dinner without the dated menus, excellent wines chosen by John, a nightcap or three, lots of conversation then bed. The conversation pattern was much the same as when we dined at Rules twenty years earlier, but updated. Plenty of reminiscence but that far outweighed by talk of post seafaring events, current affairs and the future.

We were all talked out. We ate breakfast in near silence, loaded up our cars and set off on our homeward journeys without arranging to meet again. Our fiftieth anniversary was an unrepeatable event, but we'll find another excuse.

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