

Behind the Wall

The start of 1966 hosted the beginnings of real working life for me as I entered Unicorn Gate to start the 3rd year of my 'time', having completed the first 2 years of basic training in the Flathouse Apprentices' Training Centre opposite Brompton Road, off Mile End Road. Along this thoroughfare a myriad of small shops served the apprentice and passing trade, not forgetting Ben Grubb Government Surplus (almost opposite the Mile End dairy) from whom the most unlikely acquisitions could be sourced.

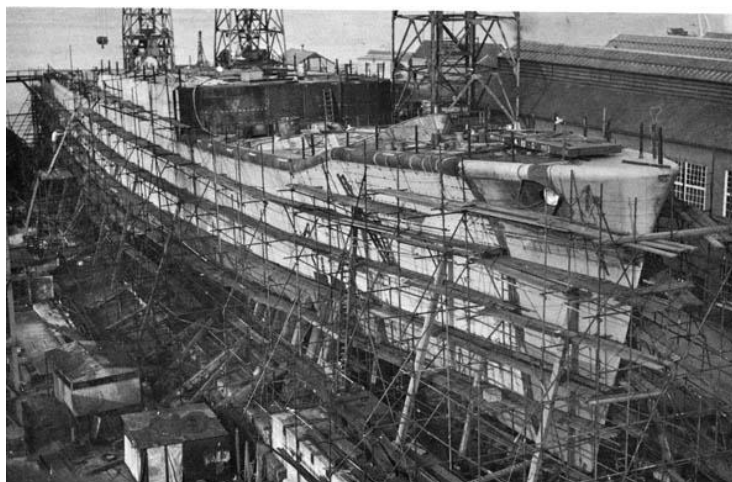
So many shops and businesses drew benefit from the Dockyard then in addition to its 12000 employees. This total was a severely reduced number from the war years when upwards of 20000 put in their share for victory amid the air raids but, for me in the sixties, this institution was to provide rich memories and more importantly working values which surpass the legislative attempts to make people work harmoniously since.



Fitters Afloat East (FAE) was my destination for that first day and thankfully the 'Docky Copper' at the gate, complete with medal ribbons, was able to point the way so clearly in my vision at the side of 12 Dock. It was a stark white building that stood out from a background of warship radar masts and crane jibs. My new pay rate was six pounds and one shilling. I was assigned to the charge hand Harry Foote and Dougie Bardsley, my tradesman mentor, for those first 10 months. These two typified the quality of men and teaching I was to be given for the next 4 years or so. Those who I mention later are worthy of the same respect.

The depth of self sufficiency and scope of work that spelt 'Dockyard' would take volumes to explain to today's 'contracted out' world. What could not be repaired, salvaged, copied or improved on, was not essential to maintaining the fleet, such was the abilities of men and tools behind the dockyard wall.

HMS LEOPARD was my first taste of a warship refit and, at the ripe old age of 18, it was obvious below decks from this cacophony of passageways littered in hoses disappearing into all compartments, temporary floor coverings and ladders, part-built main engines and innumerable pieces hanging from every view, that this warship had gone past the point of no return. It would surely



have to be scrapped; such was my perception of those first views. Before long I was working enough hours and allocated dirty and obnoxious conditions money to take home twice my basic wage - and on one occasion two and a half times - my pre tax basic. So why could I still not make this fortune last a week.....a mystery of teenage life.

In a few short months, even allowing for 'Jack's' attempt to sabotage the departure of her because he did not want to go back to sea just then, the escort frigate, with her reconditioned 8 propulsion and 4 generator engines (built in 'Pompey'), was ready to take her place back in the fleet, all decked out in her new paint.

I experienced many new practices and the confusing mass of pipe work and plant had to be learnt or at least have a clue as to its part in the scheme of things. Thus trade lectures continued at 'Hill 60' lecture room across the road from the MED (Mechanical Engineering Department) Factory. The Foster Wheeler 3-drum and Babcock & Wilcox 2-drum layouts stay in my mind today, alongside throttle valves, condensers, circ pumps and other steam plant now long lost to conventional ship propulsion.

Being 'afloat' (working on board ship either alongside or in dock) gave me the sense of freedom I enjoyed and to be truthful abused on more than a couple of occasions to visit mates in other parts of the yard or to acquire items for other pursuits. The acquired items had to be 'got past the gate' at out muster and not surprisingly I was caught by the random search going out Main Gate one night. I opened my bag to reveal the sole contents, about a yard and a half of stainless steel wire and a small pair of round nose pliers; the kit for producing French booms to fuel my passion for fishing. The shiny peek cap and black uniform asked me, "Where did you get these from?", and without hesitation I answered, "Here". "Okay on your way!" Still trying to hide my disbelief I complied immediately. Stealing is stealing but never was I tempted to steal for exchange of money - though some fools tried and paid the price.

I did say this first period afloat lasted 10 months which was not compliant with the normal routine of 4 month rotations for apprentices that most of my entry did. I can only assume they forgot about me and realised the mistake at the 10 month mark. It felt like punishment to be told to report to the Engine



Section in the MED Factory at the southern end of Bay 3. My fitter Percy Udle, with leather larynx, sported a voice an octave lower than Clarke Gable. Pointing to a set of diesel cylinder heads he gave me a single demonstration of valve removal then said,

"Okay 'stallion', do all the rest!" Keen as ever, I quickly completed the task and others until available work for me dried up. I was then introduced to a huge diesel crankcase and told to check for any signs of damage, that tapped holes

were clear and general cleanliness. All went well until I began to think I could see a continuous crack at the base of the mating sump flange. Reporting this to Percy was followed by some more senior observations and the crackcase magically disappeared to be seen later on the scrap heap at the back of the No 1 Electrical Shop.

Life in the MED Factory was not all glum and I was able to see the insides of many pumps and engines I had, up to now only helped to extract from a ship or partially repair in place. As part of my education I met some of the Dockyard Characters. These people were a combination of those fit to remain in the public domain, usually having basic labouring jobs, and those who for whatever reason were just entertaining to be around. The first group the Government employed and thus gave direction and purpose to their lives. Suffice it to say they were also preyed upon as a source of entertainment by a few. It was normal for a situation to be created as the unwitting man passed by and his curiosity aroused.

On one such occasion Donald, a very well spoken obliging labourer of advancing years, passed just as a very perplexed Turner stared at his lathe; and duly, Donald asked if he could help. The task was to measure the length of the lathe - but a tape measure could not be found. A new unit of measurement was originated and a prostrate Donald marked on the floor at head and feet then asked to move such that his feet were then at his original head marker and so on. With due attention to detail, the lathe length was declared as two and three-quarter "Donalds". He was thanked and went cheerfully on his way as the bystanders stifled laughter and returned to their machines. There are many of these stories making a contribution to our working history.

The factory like all other buildings had its own history, none more graphical than the support girder work half way up 3 bay, opposite the inspectors office and tool store, which bore the scars of shrapnel from the war. The manner of the damage awoke me to the ferocity of explosives as the holes had partially punctured and part melted the structure. The biggest testimony to the conflict was the comparative newness of the northern end of 5 bay, rebuilt after a Luftwaffe donation. Here I also worked for some time with Archy a man of gentle disposition seeing out the last few years of his 'man and boy' dockyard service. This was the New Work section where, at the time, we built and tested many valves for our latest Pompey built (and, unbeknown at the time, the last) Leander frigate HMS ANDROMEDA or "The Androm" as everyone knew her.

By the time Androm's launch date came around I was once more out afloat and I hurried down to see her accelerate gracefully to the water - as the great Dreadnoughts had done years before from the same slip. Even a formal event such as this provided its share of humour. Many 'dockies' and some visitors had grouped at the jetty side to witness her first contact with the brine,



romantic in itself, but the enthusiasm was missing the appreciation of some basic laws of physics. With the propellers set as they were, a few tons of water were quickly and copiously deflected by the blades as she entered the water - across the helpless crowds at both sides of the slip end. Shrieks of dismay were quickly followed by laughter all round, including that of the dignitaries.

History of every kind surrounded the working day and I witnessed a Rum Ration carried out with great ceremony and recall well the varnished barrel marked, "The Queen, God Bless Her", in highly-polished brass letters from which the distribution of the tot took place. The tot was not to last much longer and, although an advocate of retaining history, I had to admit I could see the problems it was able to create and understood the decision to end it. An hour after this event from the quarter deck of one of the 'carriers I worked on, there was some obstruction to my working day. Opening a weather deck level compartment to trace some system pipe work, I was confronted by two sailors doing 'comatose star fish' impressions, perhaps a little the worse for toasting Her Majesty earlier. I quietly put two clips back on the door and left. The common trade among sailors was the exchange of non-smoker's duty free cigarettes issue (blue liners) for smoker's rum, or daily tots were accumulated over weeks (strictly against the rules) and consumed quickly on suitable occasions.

A period of work which did not exactly inspire me was 10 months on board HMS BLAKE (yes I still shudder too) during her conversion from gracious



sleek and menacing, to an ugly duckling, hunchback of 14 Dock. Whatever stones I may throw at the project it was completed at the end of the sixties but not before a fire (started at the wardroom wood fit out storage area) came close to ending her days. At the time of the

alarm sounding I was working on No. 1 deck. I needed no invitation on hearing it as I literally dropped my tools and ran to the brow, getting to the dockside in a new personal best time. Smoke billowed from everywhere it seemed and, knowing that fitters were trapped below in the engine room, the order to flood the dock was swift. A painter's raft was floated under her intakes and gratings removed to allow the fitters to exit. Chiefs organised sailors to rig rough and ready bosons chairs to enable trapped workers to clamber out of port holes and to be hoisted up. Sure enough a scuttle was opened. A cloth-capped head appeared and was directed by ship's company to climb onto the jury rigged lift lowered over the side. The head acknowledged, withdrew and in seconds..... a tool box emerged and the signal to raise given by 'cloth-cap'. Obviously 'tools and tool box first' was his priority regardless of the threat to his life. This extracted some well chosen expletives, and gesticulation from the chaps above in blue that his decision was definitely incorrect! You just had to be there!

The aftermath of this fire also illustrated the devastation wrought by such events. Deck plates took on the look of a swell at sea and aluminium alloy junction boxes had run down bulkheads like melted ice cream. Regardless of the carnage, efforts were doubled and she went into service in what seemed like a few weeks later, in the spring of 1969 I think.

Those ten months were not all spent regretting the work. For a spell BLAKE was alongside the Amenity Centre on the north side of No. 3 basin. One morning the hooter for the 9.30 morning break sounded without me realising that this time was approaching. It was important to get full value from this 20 minutes and I exited a mess at the rear of 02 deck and slid 2 decks on the outer staircase with hands and feet on the hand rail. Malcolm, my partner apprentice, followed but just as I crossed the brow I heard the bell-like sound of spanners raining on the steel staircase. I swung round to see Malcolm, legs spread-eagled on his back, at the base of the stairs amongst an array of tools. A few minutes later we dried our tears and I think we agreed on 8 out of 10 for artistic interpretation.

Before I go further it has to be realised that all this manual work created a large appetite which my good mother fuelled with a whole large white loaf cut into sandwiches, plus an orange and apple or the like every day - and every day it was gone by lunch time. Fortunately there were other support facilities to supplement my 'meagre rations' in the form of the Dockyard Catering Society, I think it was called. No. 9 dock canteen was the regular meeting place for me and my chums but uppermost in my memory, next to them, is the cream or jam doughnuts which, correct me if I am wrong, were about 4d, (or a little under 2 pence in metric currency). Never before in the field of Dockyard scoff has so much pleasure been made for so many by so few!

It is not easy with the passing of time to be sure in what order I worked in various locations but one of them was PAS (Port Auxiliary Services). The group of Fitters occupied a room upstairs in the front of No. 4 Boathouse, just inside the Main Gate on the left. From here Charlie, my Fitter, and I provided maintenance to tugs - of which BRIDGET and SAMSON (an ocean goer) are in my memory. This type of small ship was a better learning platform since they lacked much of the cross-connections and duplication of systems found in warships - and thus were much simpler in layout. The quieter environment also enabled the following illegal picture to be taken on BRIDGET.



Not sure now how I was able to look so young, after all it was only yesterday!

BRIDGET was my second vessel with Diesel propulsion and it cemented an interest in Diesel engines which coincided with stories of how Blackbrook Farm was a good place to work. This site, in case you had forgotten, was the Admiralty's engine repair depot halfway up Gudge Heath lane in Fareham. To get a stint at this 'outstation' it was necessary to have good progress reports and at even at that age I also knew the value of 'in the face' lobbying - hence Mr O'Leary (the training officer) was approached with my desire. The standard of my reports would support the application I thought and sure enough I won a 6 month spell! That is another story.

As a 4th year, a group was formed to remove steam plant from the part finished carrier 'LEVIATHAN' which lay for many years in Portsmouth Harbour opposite Priddy's Hard pier (powder pier as we knew it). She was never finished after the war, but alongside near Kings Stairs we stripped-out the requirements of the Dutch Navy. During this spell, being adept with hammer and chisel, I was able to trade tasks which saved more bleeding knuckles for one of our group in return for jobs which ultimately meant less work for me. I could split nuts and hold a conversation at the same time. It



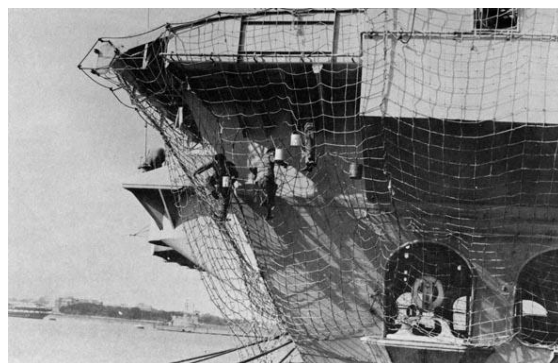
does not say a lot for me that I was so proficient in this particular art form.

Talking of art form, the main steam drums from her combined engine and boiler room had to be removed. This job proved the skill of the

yards best slingers. The lift was conducted through 3 decks by a crane lighter in the harbour which, naturally for the crane driver, was carried out blind. I do not recall seeing any use of radios - only hand signals passed between decks. A remarkable feat!

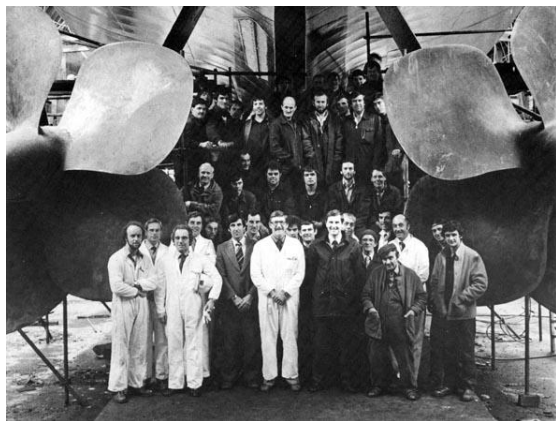
There were, of course, less skilled schemes such as Phil Whiting's loss of a spanner whilst working at boiler top level. He dropped the tool and was not quick enough to see its deflected path to the bilge. Suffice it to say he could not find the spanner when he clambered down. Undeterred by this and with an inquisitive technical mind, he returned to the same work location but this time observed the fall of a similar spanner from the same spot. Yes you guessed it; he couldn't find that one either!

I am not certain but I think it was HMS ALBION on which I worked long night hours to grind mountings to ships datum for her new chaff launchers. A freezing wind blasted across the island sponsons on which we struggled to maintain feeling in our hands and a covering to keep the worst of the chill out. On completion of this



task and some time later she was moved from D Lock to North Slip Jetty. Most people would vacate the ship and return when she was relocated. I recall climbing the lattice main mast and enjoying the view for the entire journey!

In stealing terms dockyard theft was normally related to smaller things unless of course you had a similar experience to this. As was usual during the winter months there was always the need for dock work, just to make you even



colder. On this occasion it was HMS GLAMORGAN to be changed from 4 to 5-bladed propellers. Billy Farwell and I set about the task and had the first prop off and onto the dockside, and were preparing for the replacement, when the charge hand appeared in the dock and asked the whereabouts of the original propeller. I smiled broadly and thought that was not a bad joke. However his face retained its pan

expression. "It's on the dock side", I replied. "No, it's not!", was the retort. It transpired that a well-oiled operation had attempted the disappearing trick of a 14ft prop and was fortunately caught up with in Fratton goods yard!

Further education was added to this task when during Saturday the delegated engineering officer asked if we would kindly work through our lunch break so that he could witness the final 'flogging up' of the second new prop - as he had a rather urgent appointment in London. This we agreed to and the job was completed in the early afternoon. After a short rest, we decided to leave the dock for a spell before replacing the cone and bonnet. Approaching the ships brow the same officer, with sheepish grin, acknowledged us as he escorted his gorgeous blonde 'appointment in London' on board!

As much a part of working in the Dockyard for me was the cross-harbour ferry. A 'turk towner' (Gosport) by birth, meant this 5 days a week journey, (sometimes 7) had its own life. Before the covered flat-top vessels that ply this strip of water today, the elegance of conventional hulls powered by steam or diesel, with open bridges, enabled you to experience the fresh air, the deluge of sea spray, freezing rain, or the free and frank exchange of Anglo-Saxon that was part of the morning crossing to achieve the 7.30 clock-in. The exchange resulted from the violent pitch of the vessel during inclement weather (spelt semi-hurricane) when cycles parked on the fore deck would shift and become entwined pedal on spoke and saddle on handlebar cable until, at the Pompey side with a mass of tangled bikes, 'fisty cuffs' were only avoided in the interests of clocking-in on time.

With due respect to those earlier craft, it was not just the means of conveyance that could lead to unrehearsed action. Both the Gosport and Pompey side ramps approaching the ferry pontoon were laid with a well worn timber surface. The combination of rain and low tide produced ice like conditions on a steep descent. Couple this to the bell sounding for the imminent departure of the ferry and you have a downhill cycle race without brakes or grip! As I recall, a few cycles were donated to Portsmouth Harbour in the interests of the rider not wishing to include himself. When the covered version came into

service around 1966 the 'fun' was over and we became orderly pampered passengers.

Eventually the apprentice wage rocketed from 6 pounds 1 shilling to around 9 pounds and on to 14 before even greater bonuses rained upon us. Okay, so I was still broke 3 days after pay day!

The greater bonus came in the form of the 4 year apprenticeship, now believed and recorded by some to have started in the early 70s, but which was actually



PERSONNEL DEPARTMENT 23309
H.M. DOCKYARD, PORTSMOUTH
Telephone: Portsmouth 22351, ext.

July 1968
7 AUG 1968

PerM/305

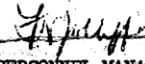
Dear Sir/Madam,

It has been decided that the training of a Craft Apprentice may be completed after four years, at the age of twenty, or on the 1st April 1968, whichever is the later date.

2. This date would be subject to adjustment, if necessary, caused by excess sick leave or lost time, as at present.
3. This reduction in the length of your son's apprenticeship will not be made until you and your son have signed and returned the statement below agreeing to this course of action. An official paid envelope is enclosed for this purpose.
4. If you wish to discuss this matter will you please telephone this Department for an appointment.

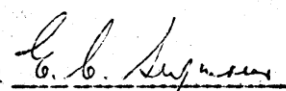
Mk E.C. Seymour,
74, Finton Rd.,
GOSPORT

Yours faithfully,


PERSONNEL MANAGER.

To: Personnel Department (Training Section).

I agree with the proposed shortening of the length of my son's apprenticeship, as described in paragraph 1 of your letter.

Signed 
(Parent/Guardian).

I agree with the proposed shortening of the length of my apprenticeship, as described in paragraph 1 of your letter.

Signed 
(Apprentice).

NF
1/67

commenced in 1968. Doing your 'time' was fixed in your thinking as 5 years, but the lure of tradesman's wages at the 4 years and 4 months stage for me was too much to resist. As you can see below, Dad and I signed up to this document. My wife says, I remain as cheap as this to the current day.

As part of the scheme to reduce costs and 'streamline' the Dockyard systems, the old well-loved Job Price Contract ("the note") was ceased and replaced by DIBS (Dockyard Incentive Bonus Scheme), and we were even given a glossy pamphlet to explain this wonderful venture – through which, at 100% achievement, a bonus of 1 shilling and 9 pence per hour would be paid. A pity, I knew many tradesmen who had made between 2 and 4 shillings per hour on "the note". However to sweeten this change the basic tradesman's wage was set at 19 pounds 19 shillings. Her Majesty's Dockies were now in the elite 1000 pounds a year bracket.

With the passing of time and a couple of unfortunate events my interest in bilge grovelling or freezing in a dock started to erode so, on the 27th March 1970 at FAE offices with the words of foreman writer, Bert Norris, "You'll be back sonner", ringing in my ears I left the world 'behind the wall' for good. Today I look back on this time and the people who taught me as very high quality. It is easy for the common label of the "dockyard matey" to be one of not doing a full week's work by comparison to his opposite number on the outside. The following words to a song from years before my time reflect this impression.

"Dockyard matey's children, sitting on the dockyard wall

*Watching their fathers doing **** all,*

When they grow older, they'll be dockyard mateys too,

*Just like their fathers with **** all to do."*

Sorry no prizes for filling the gaps.

Suffice it to say that when an urgent job was necessary to return a ship to the fleet, the Dockyard man was equal in output to any. Personal issues were resolved in a forthright manner and men got on with the job. As an apprentice, I could not have had better skills or life training!

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