

## **The Life & Sea-faring times of Richard Hendy, mariner.**

***“Seafaring was, and still is a very dangerous profession. Hardly any of us realised it at the time, we just knew we loved the life....and it could never happen to us.....”***

“Gulliver” on “Old Friends Plus”, the British Merchant Navy website



***Richard Hendy, aged 97 in 2023.***

## Introduction

In March 2023 I was excited to receive a letter. Now any letter delivered by Royal Mail in these days of electronic communications which is not a bank statement, bill, a medical communication, or a greetings card, is an event. This one was obviously none of these, made different by its carefully written address on a small square envelope. The letter inside, on lined paper, was in the similar clear hand I learned to write at school from copying on the blackboard. I recognised the style at once.

“Dear Mrs Lindegaard [the letter began]

“I found your Book ‘Sappho and her Sisters’ quite interesting. As a seventeen-year-old Asst Steward I sailed on the *Melito* for a short while between Oct 1943 to Feb 1944 we sailed mostly to Dublin, Waterford, Swansea, Liverpool, and I can tell you there is some very interesting characters on board. I also like the way you followed up with the life and history of the crews of those ships.

Yours faithfully

R. Hendy

P.S. A first class book of the sea.”

I read the letter, blinked, and read it again in case I was mistaken. In 1943 when “R. Hendy” sailed aboard the *‘Melito’*, I was six years old. If he was 17 in 1943 then he must be eleven years older than me! Despite there being more of us aged relics than ever, I am not used to people being older than me. Could his dates be right? Intrigued, I replied at once and to cut a long story short, a few weeks later was chatting with him in his living room, drinking a cup of tea. There was no mistake. Richard Hendy was ninety-seven years old, but in appearance, vigour and personality he could easily pass for a man twenty years younger. He told me he had never married “I didn’t really have time” but “when my cousin died in 1984, I took up with his lady, I looked after her then until 2007. In her last years she had dementia.” When I asked him about his seafaring life he said “I’m not very interesting. I really didn’t do that much.”

He is not on-line, so his neighbour had kindly printed out *‘Sappho’* for him. My tale is all about the crews who sailed the small cargo ships from the Bristol Channel across to Ireland and European ports, a route with which he was familiar from being aboard the *‘Melito’* which sailed between Bristol and Antwerp or Irish ports, with general cargo. In wartime for obvious reasons the comings and goings of merchant shipping were not published in the local press, and the voyage may have been sandwiched in between some of his more exotic destinations but, after the war, it was a different story; *Melito* made incidental appearances in the Western Daily Press in the ‘Arrivals and Departures column of the Shipping News.

## Part 1. War Sailor!

*“Atlantic Convoys, very dangerous stuff! But I got away with it.”*

Richard Hendy

Richard’s first voyage was in December 1942 and was a great deal further than the Bristol Channel and into what mariners called the ‘Deep Sea’.

“During the war?” I was incredulous.

“Oh, yes.” he said nonchalantly. “With the Norwegians. But I got away with it.”

“In 1942 when I was sixteen, I was on Norwegian ships which came into Avonmouth. They couldn’t get Norwegian crews owing to the German occupation. There was a man called Mr Richards, a bit of a con man, could get you a place on them. He had stores in Park Street. One Friday he said, ‘I’ll get you a ship, but you’ll have to do my fire watching tonight.’”

[During World War Two, able-bodied men of any age and youths who were not in the army had to take turns ‘fire watching’, standing on top of buildings in the dark in case fire broke out from incendiary bombs.]

“So, as I wanted a ship, I did it. I did his fire watching. I was up all night. I never had time to go home first. I had to go straight to Avonmouth.”

“Whatever did your parents say?” I interrupted.

“Not very pleased,” he said, “But I would have had to go somewhere sooner or later. I would have been called up. I didn’t fancy killing people.”

Richard’s parents, Albert and Mabel, were both from the Bristol area but Richard was born in Wales, on 15 March 1926 at Treherbert in the Rhondda Valley, where his father, a miner, had gone for work. They were a family of four. Richard has an elder sister, Ruth. By 1939 the family were back in Bristol at 3 Kingsland Road, St Philips.

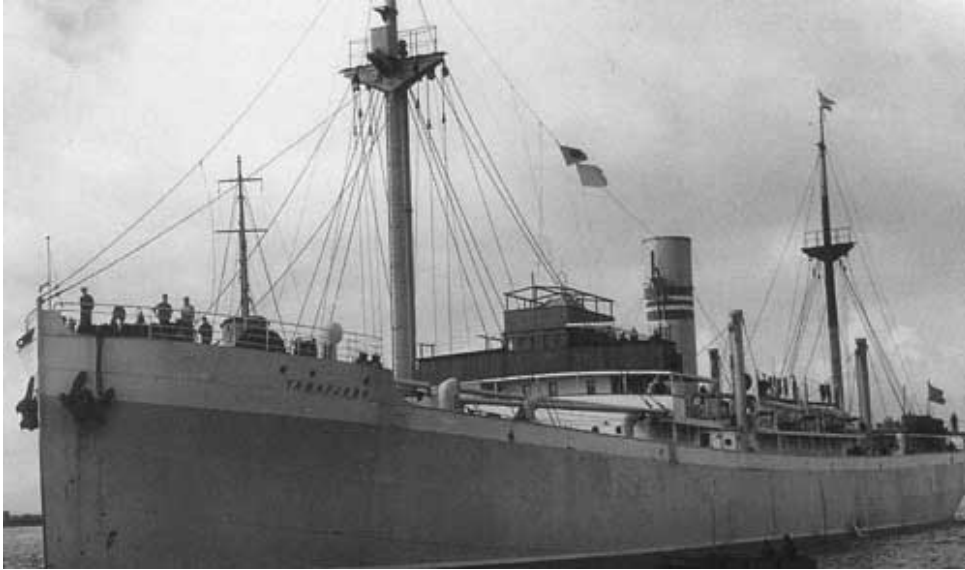
His ship was S.S. *Tanafjord*, the first of the thirty-one different ships in which he voyaged the oceans of the world in a sea-going career which spanned 1942-1966, with the exception of a couple of brief interludes he spent working ashore.

“Anyway, I got to Avonmouth as soon as it was light, and the ship sailed. That was West Africa, Bathurst, Freetown, Takoradi, Lagos, Edinburgh. I was away seven months, from 9 December 1942 to 25 June 1943. I was in four other Norwegian ships after that. “

“Do you speak Norwegian?”

“A bit. Commands and that. Most of ‘em spoke better English than I did.”

Richard, possibly heart-in-mouth, went aboard his first ship, the oil tanker *Tanafjord* on 9 December 1942 and departed Avonmouth on 17 December 1942, arriving safely in Swansea the same day.



***S.S. Tanafjord. Richard was one of the “foreign nationals” who sailed with the Norwegian Fleet.***

Prior to her arrival at Avonmouth, the *Tanafjord*, as part of Convoy 161 carrying vital supplies for the war effort had just crossed the Atlantic surviving all the hazards of the wartime convoys, one of many such crossings. At this point Richard joined the ship, bound eventually for Africa to pick up more oil.



***North Atlantic Convoy bound for Africa. (courtesy New York Times)***

The ship left Swansea 31 Dec 1942 and he spent the New Year 1943 at sea. Tanafjord docked at Liverpool and sailed on 2<sup>nd</sup> January as part of Convoy ON 161 for the West Coast

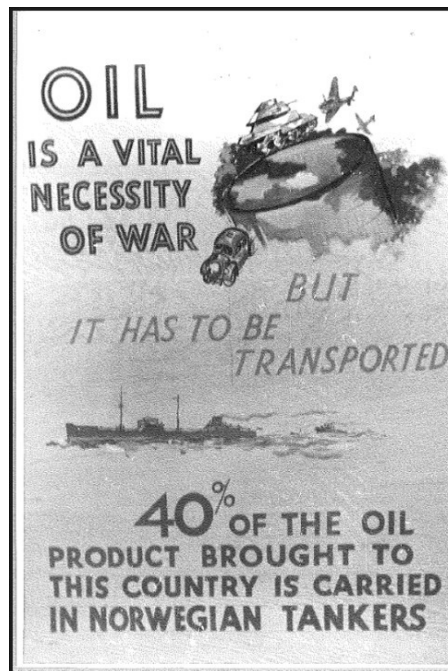
of Africa. They carried two passengers for Freetown, Sierra Leone. (Who these two were and what they were up to is a mystery.) The ship took on cargo at Freetown and by then “independent” sailed from Freetown 10 February for Bathurst in Gambia, (now called Banjul) as part of Convoy SR 1/1, returning to Takoradi whence they sailed back and forth several times between there and Lagos, Nigeria, the last time escorted by HMS Wolverine. They finally arrived back in Freetown 31 May, Convoy SL130 for a rendezvous with w/MKS on 11 June. They arrived in Scotland on 21 June, sailed the next day for Leith (WN 445) and finally docked 24 June, thence to Avonmouth and signed off. Richard does not remember whether he felt homesick but seven months is a long time to be away from home. Never mind that, he was hooked; he immediately looked out for another ship.



*British war material being offloaded in Takoradi, Gold Coast, World War Two.*

Richard remembers that on this first voyage he was one of four English boy sailors. Their routine was hectic, from 06.30 to 20.00 hours, spent running about. Presumably any one of the three would be on watch for the night hours, as nothing closes down at sea or if any one of them was sick. Richard was once seasick for eight days. His particular job was “looking after the engineers, the stokers, making sure they got to their watch on time, then to the galley, get their meals, wash up, sweep and tidy the mess room, clean the W.C. ...” with the other three doing similar jobs looking after the crew in various departments on board.

He had evidently given satisfaction, for he soon obtained a berth on another Norwegian ship. The *Norholm* arrived in Avonmouth on 1 July 1943 and left again on 3<sup>rd</sup> July for a return convoy across the Atlantic to New Jersey, with Richard aboard.



On 3 September 1939 when the Second World War broke out, Norway was a neutral country. For the next seven months until the invasion of 9 April 1940 by Hitler's Germany and Norway's subsequent occupation, Norwegian mariners already at sea had been engaged in "a forgotten war", dodging submarines and mines. In this period 58 Norwegian ships were sunk, and 377 seamen lost their lives. In April 1940, there were a thousand Norwegian ships still at sea engaged in foreign traffic manned by up to 30,000 crew which included a thousand nationals from other countries. These ships and their crews were quickly incorporated into the state shipping company Nortraship, which became the "outdoor" merchant fleet of Norway. None of these mariners were allowed to go home to Norway at the end of each voyage. Those who "jumped" in foreign ports were considered deserters. Conditions are vividly brought home in the Norwegian film "War Sailor" which can be accessed on Netflix.

The naval war was primarily a battle for supplies; it was here that Norway arguably made its most important contribution to the Allied cause. Its modern tanker fleet carried an estimated 40% of the vital oil and oil products imported into Britain from the USA as part of the convoys of unarmed merchant ships carrying other supplies which were shepherded across the Atlantic by the corvettes of the Royal Navy. It was into this deadly arena that the teenage Richard thrust himself with the eager self-assurance of youth.

"Atlantic Convoys, very dangerous stuff," Richard remembered, a masterpiece of understatement, with perhaps a little bit of pride.

During the war he crossed the North Atlantic four times to Canada and USA, all with a background of terror due to marauding U-Boats – "one time in 1943, the Atlantic was showing her bad face, the weather was so bad that even the U-Boats couldn't do much." The

respite was welcome to those who weren't too ill to move. "I was so sick, I couldn't think of anything else."

He had a few scrapes, a couple of minor injuries, after one incident he was in hospital for ten days. In the *Norholm*, he had returned from the USA to Loch Ewe, in Wester Ross, a strategic gathering place for convoys. "We were trick acting, messing about, one of the chaps threw a knife at me, but a bit of luck, it landed in my shoe."

Richard was paid off early in Scotland though the usual pay off was after 3 months. This made him recall a grievance:

"If the ship was torpedoed then the crew's wages were stopped."

This seemed massively unfair to me.

"Even if they were in a lifeboat waiting for rescue?"

"Yes. That's true. But I was lucky. Once one of our convoys was torpedoed. That was the nearest I got."

With their country occupied, none of the Norwegian crew members was able to go home until after the liberation. They stayed around the ports in Merchant Navy missions.

Richard's last Norwegian ship was the *Norheim*, crossing from the USA. "Taking aviation spirit to the Mediterranean ports." Which sounded hair raising. "I was a steward by then, waiting on, and I would have stayed with them, the Norwegians, I liked working with them, but after the war ended, they could get their own men." <sup>1</sup>

He muses about a ship, name unremembered: "There was the cook, chief steward, I was his assistant, officers on the bridge, two coloured firemen, they lived in Easton, Bristol, and two naval gunners. Mr Holmes was the Chief Officer, and there was also a second officer. Coming home when we docked, we tied up at Prince Street, we had to get settled. Different cargo. Smalls, generals, sometimes large, in barrels."

The presence of the gunners suggest it was still wartime.

The Bristol Channel crossing in S.S. *Melito* to which Richard referred in his letter, appears after the *Norholm* as "Dublin-Waterford-Bristol-Liverpool, paid off injured" on the list of ships he gave me. Captain John Price, master of the *Melito*, who died on 6 January 1946, is remembered on the Merchant Navy Memorial at Cardiff.

The *Melito* has a much darker association, a horrifying miscarriage of justice. A Somali, Mahmoud Hussein Mattan, a former merchant seaman and small-time gambler, was wrongfully sentenced to death and hanged in 1952 for the murder of a Cardiff woman who kept a small shop. A murder he did not commit. Another seaman, Jamaican born Harold Cover gave identification evidence against Mattan. Cover had spent three months aboard *Melito* in 1945 before he deserted. Cover's evidence, together with a case riddled with racial

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<sup>1</sup> For websites of Norwegian Ships see Note 1.

overtones and judicial prejudice, secured the conviction of an innocent man. Though the case has never been fully solved or closed, it is now widely believed that Cover was the murderer and gave evidence against Mattan to conceal his own crime. In 1969 he attempted to cut the throat of his own daughter with a razor. She survived, but Cover was tried for attempted murder for which he was sentenced to life imprisonment.

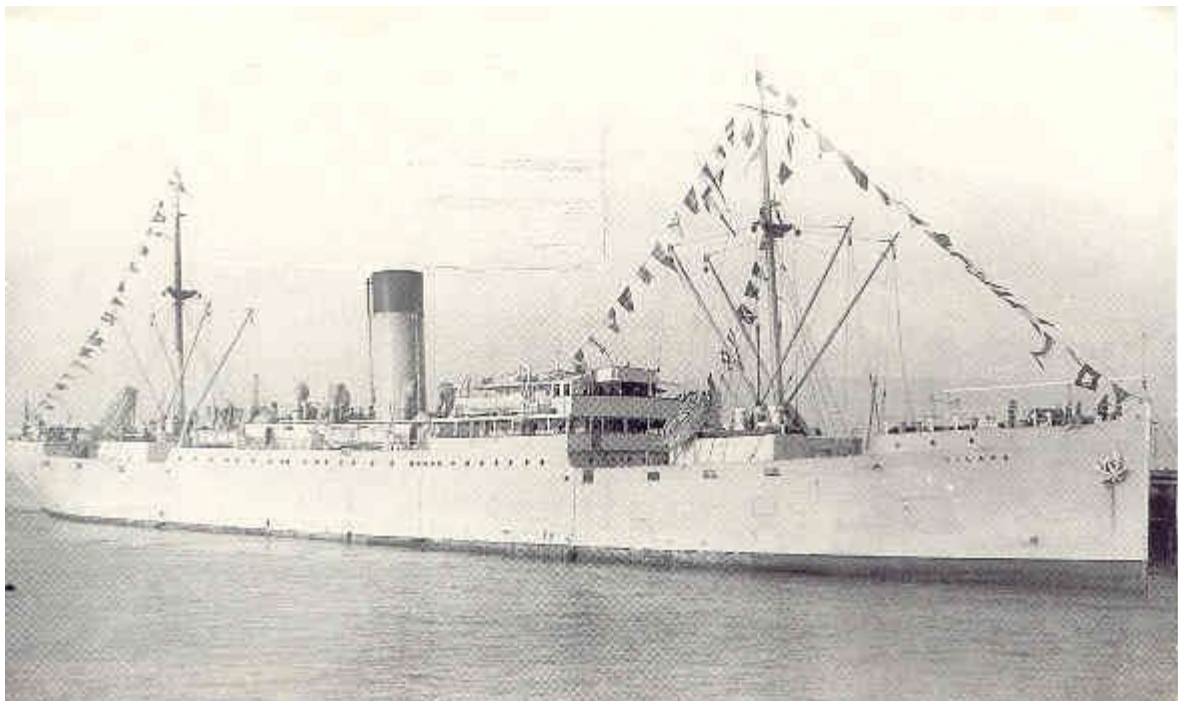
Forty-six years after this infamous episode and its terrible, tragic outcome Mattan received a posthumous 'pardon'. He became the first person in British law to have a conviction for murder quashed. The notorious case is the subject of a book by Nadifa Mohamed, 'The Fortune Men', which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. It is a very difficult read.

Mattan's case was one of a number of dubious capital convictions and subsequent executions which took place mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. [I can remember the horror of the newspaper reports of the message posted outside each prison at 8 a.m. after an execution to say that "justice" had been served.] The death penalty, after years of campaigning by the Labour MP Sydney Silverman was finally abolished in 1969.

## Part 2: Bananas!

*"I was very popular".*

**Richard Hendy.**



*The Tilapa (built 1928), dressed overall, arriving in Avonmouth on 30 December 1945, when she brought back the first consignment of bananas to Britain after the war.*



Since 1940, not a single ship with a cargo of bananas had sailed into Britain. It is hard to imagine in these more blasé times what a huge event the arrival of the once familiar sight of an Elders & Fyffes banana boat coming into Bristol was. It heralded a communal sigh of relief that things, after six years of war, “were getting back to normal.” Hundreds of children were cheering at the quayside to see the vessel dock. Recollections differ, but in one version, as *Tilapa* berthed, a member of the crew threw down a banana and a little girl, the daughter of a dock worker caught it. However, we can reveal the truth from Richard’s photo below: it was a bunch of bananas and somehow the child, waiting apprehensively on the right, probably terrified, was being introduced to a whole *bunch* of bananas by a large group of men, all shouting and laughing.

(Author’s note: If I can bring in another personal observation, I was eight in 1945, our world was women oriented, so most of us children were wary of men, as we rarely saw one except the elderly and those excused service for one reason or another. Certainly not in a noisy group like this.)



***This is the bona fide photograph of what happened on the day. Our man Richard is on the extreme left, gripping his forearm, his hand holding a cigarette butt.***

***Now look carefully at the version published in the press. Smoke and Mirrors.....***



..... *a different girl, older, more confident.*

(The bananas in both pictures look a bit manky and would be disdained by shoppers nowadays. The banana from which the girl is taking a tentative bite appears an improvement on “the hand” being offered in the first picture, even comparatively pristine, except for a small blemish at the point. This cannot be said for the fruit held by the two men, the ship’s Captain, and the executive of Elders & Fyffes. It doesn’t surprise me in the least that on some occasions the bananas “went off” during transit. Two random newspapers, twenty years apart, reveal the worst. The Gloucester Echo reported, 4 June 1946, that nine tons of bananas, 41,000 stems, were dumped on a tip at Avonmouth, being “uneatable”. On 9 October 1965 when Avonmouth was “strike bound”, the Daily Mirror reported 56,000 hands of rotten bananas thrown overboard in the Atlantic. More research would surely reveal many other instances of wastage.)

The arrival of the first cargo merited a Civic Reception on site at the docks. In the presence of city dignitaries, the Lord Mayor, Alderman James Owen, made a speech of welcome, with a corresponding, though rather less excitable message from the Mayor of Kingston, Jamaica, who hoped for “an expansion of trade between our two countries”.

When the party had moved off to their informal lunch at the Docks’ Office, Alderman A.W. Burgess said, “The toast should be ‘to the Banana!’ but as the banana could not reply, the toast was Elders & Fyffes.” Mr B.S. Caws responded that it was 45 years since the first shipment from the West Indies and the company would not be satisfied until they had a boat a week. Elders & Fyffes lost 15 vessels during WW2.

There was a slight downside to the festivities. The *Tilapa* had carried fewer bunches than was expected. There would be enough to go around for the Bristol children, but Bath kids would have to wait until the arrival of the next boatload in a week’s time.

(When her sea life was over, *Tilapa* was put to good use ashore. In June 2015, "Alice B" wrote an anecdote in an online forum, "Ships' Nostalgia":

"My grandad built a house on Anglesey in 1959/1960, using fittings salvaged from a ship being broken up in Liverpool which was known locally as 'the banana boat house'. I found out recently that it was the S.S. *Tilapa* ..... the things that he salvaged - a lot of teak cladding, dark wood cupboards, heavy doors, made me think as a child that they'd been breaking up a luxury cruise ship, but I'd love to know what she was like from people who've worked on the S.S. *Tilapa*."

The only replies came from John Rogers of Avonmouth, "Many a banana came out of the dock that day under a docker's shirt," and Phil Hughes: "I have the ship's clock from S.S. *Tilapa*. My late father was one of the last crew before she was scrapped."

Amidst the celebrations for the unloading of the bananas there was tragedy. Aboard the *Tilapa* there had been four West Indian stowaways. Two of them, Albert Miller, 32, and Vincent Anglin, 27, jumped overboard fully clothed from the ship's stern within sight of Clevedon Pier. They were last seen swimming towards the Black Nore light, one mile from the shore. They were believed to have drowned, though no bodies were washed ashore.



***The Black Nore Lighthouse, built 1894, is now a tourist attraction at Portishead.***

Richard said "Poor chaps. I expect they thought the sea would be warm, like Jamaica. Not like the Bristol Channel in winter. They went over the side. I thought what a terrible thing to do. Just imagine going into the sea in the dark."

The other two stowaways were not discovered until the *Tilapa* berthed at Avonmouth. Jasper Morgan, 26, and another man, unnamed, managed to make a run for it. They were wearing dungarees and lumber jackets. A hue and cry was raised for Morgan in Bristol and Cardiff where he was known to have friends. When Morgan was not, (apparently) captured, the press lost interest in him.

The Fyffes' banana boats were an apparent magnet for stowaways. As an example, ten men were arrested when their ship *Matina* (on which Richard sailed several times) docked at Southampton 1953. (Bradford Observer, 7.9.1953). In the Daily Mirror's report, the next day,

“each man was gaoled for one month, though two who could not provide identification were refused permission to remain in the country,” which infers that eight were allowed to stay, a seeming formality. Give yourself up on arrival, serve the time, and, if the authorities knew who you were, you might be granted “leave to remain”.

Illegal arrivals became so commonplace coming to Bristol, and other ports on the banana boats from the West Indies that even by 1947, there were mutterings about “an organised traffic”. (Western Daily Press 23.12.1947). Human beings risking everything to make what they perceive to be a better life for themselves is nothing new. Neither are rackets. Supply and demand.

Richard said “There used to be a lot of smuggling going on. At a café in Prince Street.”

Me: “Rum? Cigarettes?”

Richard: “No, [laughing] but I got a turkey in one time. Meat was on ration. Can’t remember how I managed to get it through.”

### **Part 3: The Sea is Better!**

***“It isn’t that life ashore is distasteful to me. But life at sea is better.”***

**Sir Francis Drake**

Richard recalls little of individual voyages and only the odd name. He seems to have seen the world without the colours, sights, or smells, even danger, making much of an impression. Or perhaps forgotten. But he knows all his ships, first to last, all different, some obviously of a better standard than others as he sailed with these more than once. He has kept all his pay books with the details.

It is no surprise that for those travellers seeking “something different” a passage aboard a cargo ship was widely sought after. (From my own time working in a travel agency in the early sixties, I remember, having to pore over the ABC Shipping Guide for customers eager for adventure. A lot of work for little reward, we clerks muttered, why couldn’t they go on package tours like everybody else?) The *Tilapa* could carry eight passengers. Some of Richard’s ships, like the *Auriguani* or *Cavina* carried forty or more. Richard, no longer a boy, served as bar-room steward, or saloon waiter. Of course, on the bigger vessels like the *Athlone Castle* there were numerous passengers.

The S.T. *Winchester Victory* was one of an emergency fleet of fast cargo vessels designed by the Americans to replace the slower Liberty ships. She went into service on 11 April 1945 in the Pacific repatriating civilian captives of the Japanese between ports in the Netherlands East Indies. Richard served in this ship, presumably by then on loan to the British engaged in similar work repatriating German POWs liberated from British camps to Cuxhaven near Hamburg, then continuing to Malta, Athens, Marseille, and Ports Said to pick up thousands of British troops of the Eighth Army who had fought against the Afrika Corps. He recalls the

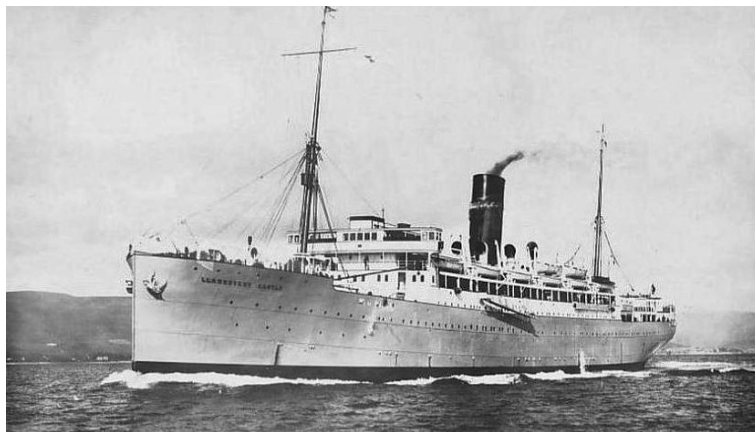
shock of the bitter winter of 1947, going up the English Channel where “the ice was two or three feet thick”.

The M.V. *Athlone Castle* came next. Her readiness for the Cape passenger service merited a newspaper item. In July 1948, she came into Southampton with 112,423 cases of citrus fruits, another welcome cargo.<sup>2</sup> (Children were restricted to one orange per week! Luckily, I don't like oranges much.) Another item also concerns food. A party of cricketers arrived from Cape Town, thirty male, and fifteen women, (which pleased me) due to play sixty matches in England. Each one brought with them a 25-pound food parcel for distribution.<sup>3</sup> Britain was still in the grip of food rationing, of course. Finally, another tragic event. After departing from Cape Town, a crew member, unidentified by name, fell overboard. Efforts to find the man failed.<sup>4</sup>

After *Athlone Castle*, Richard worked ashore for a while “Laying wooden and rubber floors in pubs, shops and hospitals” but the mundane life soon palled, and he was lured back.

Sailors are notoriously superstitious, and the S.S. *Boston City* might have seemed a poor choice, for in January 1948, in dock at Canon's Marsh, on two separate occasions, two dock workers met with serious accidents. Alfred Morgan, aged 73, of Bedminster, was at work in the stoke hold when he fell and broke his hip. It was impossible to take him up by stretcher and members of the crew formed a human chain to bring him to the surface, passing him hand to hand up three flights of iron stairs. A couple of days later John Poole, 62, of Pill was clearing out the boiler when he was caught in a blast of steam and scalded in the neck. Both men were taken to hospital.<sup>5</sup>

*Boston City* took Richard across the Atlantic, to Montreal. After that, three long haul voyages in the SS *Llandovery Castle*, “Anti-clockwise round Africa, Port Said, Genova, London”, Richard said.



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<sup>2</sup> ibid 22.7.1948)

<sup>3</sup> ibid 15.5.1948

<sup>4</sup> Gloucester Echo 28.12.1948

<sup>5</sup> WDP 19.1.1948 & 22.1.1948)

## ***The liner, SS. Llandoverly Castle***

During the war she had been converted as a hospital ship with 450 beds and 89 medics, the only Union Castle ship used in the capacity. She returned to the Round Africa service in May 1947 (of which Richard was a part) and completed her last voyage in 1952 and was broken up in 1953.

His next voyage was with SS. *Moreton Bay*, his first time to a new continent, shipping thousands of passengers leaving Britain in the hope of finding better times. These were the famous “Ten-pound Poms” in search of a new life in Australia.

**australia**

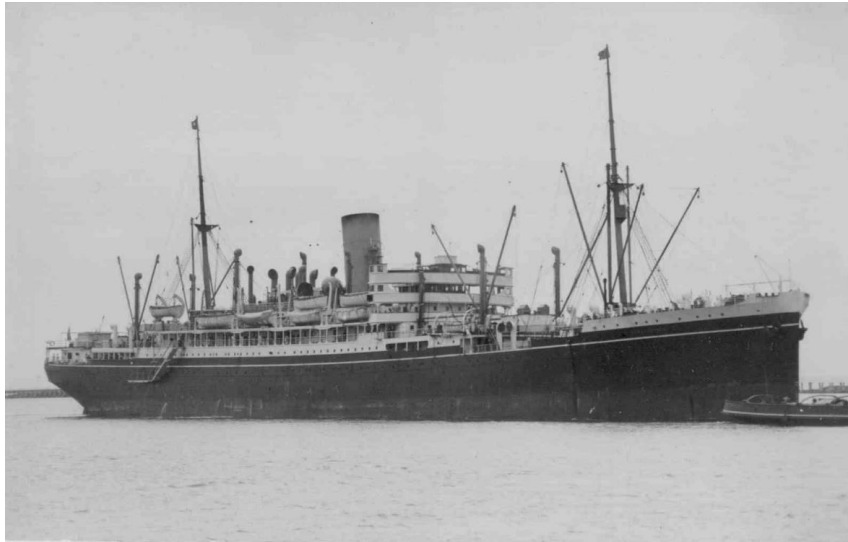
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Norfolk House, Smallbrook, Ringway, Birmingham, 5.

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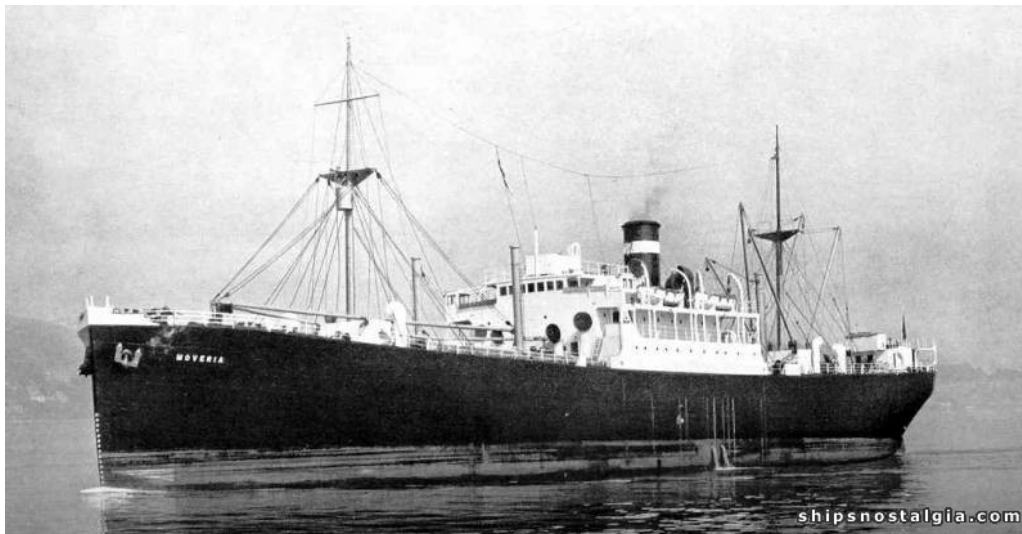


**SS. Moreton Bay. After War Service, she became an emigrant ship.**

(She was the sister ship to the famous "Jervis Bay" which was sunk by enemy action in the Atlantic in 1940 when escorting a convoy and nearly 200 crew were killed including Captain Fegen who was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.)

#### **MOVERIA**

Then Richard sailed three times to Montreal, twice in MV. *Moveria* and once in SS. *Wells City*.



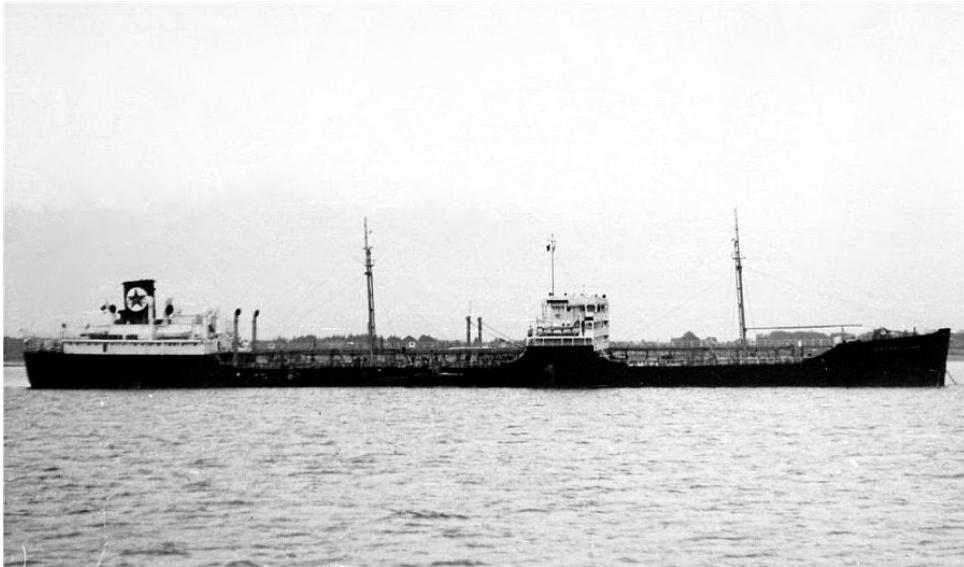
**M.V. Moveria. Montreal-Avonmouth copyright National Museum of Wales**

#### **WELLS CITY**

originally called St Ina, was built in 1922 was bought by Bristol City Line in 1948 when her name was changed. She was sold to Pakistan in 1951.

Richard is not given to rhetoric. He went all round the world a few times, places to set pulses racing, diverse as Pitcairn, Ceylon, Cape Town, Cuba, Lagos, Sydney, Fernando Po, Rio, Vitoria, Brazil, Aruba, Newfoundland. Even the bread-and-butter ports, Bristol Channel, Kingston to Avonmouth.

One port seems to have been much the same as any other, and for his time ashore he was reticent as to details. He always went with mates, never braving the ports alone, took an occasional walk round town, but avoided trouble, though on the whole did not apparently venture much further than from the ship to the Merchant Navy club. "Do you drink?" "Not a lot," he replied. "Plenty of rum though, on the Jamaica run." But most of the time it was "Just a job of work I was usually very tired at the end of each voyage."



***Victory Loan. One of the type 2 Oil Tankers built in the USA. After the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War they were surplus to US requirement and 52 of them were sold to Great Britain***

He was midway through a two-year stint, on an oil tanker, the *Victory Loan*, from Abu Dhabi to Australia when he made a shocking decision. Whether it was a whim, out of boredom, hatred of the ship, or something else, which he didn't divulge, but in Brisbane he decided to "jump".



Deserting is not the easy matter it might seem. Merchant Seamen were under contract with the ship owners for each voyage. Jumping ship was effectively a criminal offence. It might



lead to prison, “but they had to catch you first.” Once again, he was characteristically vague. Trying to prompt him, I said “Are you scared they’ll still come after you?” He ignored this and replied instead, “I joined the Australian Army.”

“What?” I was truly taken aback. “Why on earth.....?”

“I had no way of getting home, I had nowhere to go, no papers, so no chance of getting a job. So, I joined the Australian Army.”

The Army! I couldn’t believe you couldn’t just walk in and enlist. Surely you needed to sign something. Prove your identity? Even in Australia? Even in the dark ages of transportation they would have asked you to produce a ticket of leave. He just smiled, without further revelation. I said, “You certainly knew how to pick your moment!”

It was towards the end of 1950, perhaps this is the clue. The Aussies were up to their necks in the War in Korea. Richard was twenty-three years old,

“I was in an Infantry Battalion with the Australians for two years. After six months training, they flew us out, first to Japan, then Korea. The place was all rubble. We pushed through to Pusan. We pushed the Communists back all the way to the Chinese border. Then the Chinese joined in, and they pushed us all the way back again.” He remained unruffled, not forthcoming. Once again, he led a charmed life. He was not wounded or taken prisoner.



**Australian soldiers in Korea, 1953. (© George Luff)**

“In 1953, aged 25, I came back on the *Orion*, Sydney to Tilbury, the only time I was a passenger. *Orion* was on a return sailing from taking another lot of ten-pound Poms out to Australia. The place was still hung about with adverts and posters of *Come to sunny Australia.*”

“Didn’t you fancy staying there?”

“No. I wanted to go home. I wanted to see my Mum and Dad.”

## Part 4: The Catalogue of the Ships.

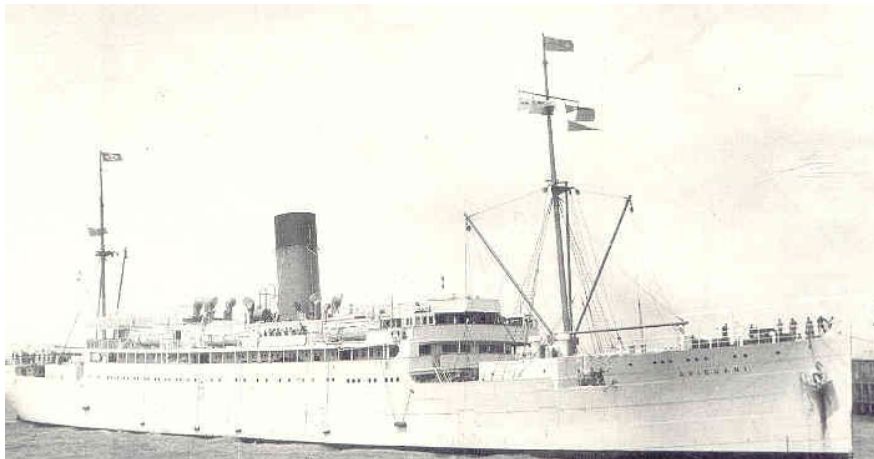
Homer did it first of course. The “Catalogue of the Ships”, the Greek Armada which sailed against Troy in antiquity. Richard too supplied a list of his ships, names and destinations, from war at sea with the Norwegian *Tanafford* to S.T. *Chirripo* and the Panama Canal.

But as we grew nearer to the present his reminiscences became ever more sparse. I have augmented his remarks with a few online memories of others plus newspaper cuttings which may or not refer to incidents of which he may once have been aware. In no way do they constitute a history of these ships, each of which needs its own chapter but, I hope, give a general flavour of life at sea.

After his return from soldiering in Korea, Richard had been at home for a short time when his sea legs began itching again.

### ARAGUANI

The first ship in this final chapter was the S.S. *Araguani*, Avonmouth-Jamaica-Avonmouth, a banana boat. According to information online she was the last coal burning ship on the Atlantic line and broken up in 1956.



***The Ariguani.*** (courtesy <https://iancoombe.tripod.com/id14.html>)

### WELSH PRINCE

“After a good American tobacco harvest, Welsh Prince, 7381 tons, docked in Avonmouth from Norfolk, Virginia, USA with 5,000 casks of tobacco. (Evening Post 15.10.1954)

When Richard was aboard, *Welsh Prince* carried iron ore and a few passengers between Liverpool and Newport Mews, USA.



*The Welsh Prince, (Courtesy Museum of Wales)*

## **OAKMORE**

M.V. *Oakmore*. A single screw, she was 4,700 tons and owned by Johnson Warren. Richard went Beirut, Lebanon, to Iskenderun, on the east coast of Turkey, and back into Liverpool. He was now a steward.

*Oakmore* had survived an 'interesting' war. Several old mariners told the story online in 'Ships Nostalgia'.

Nick Jones: "I stood by on this vessel in Liverpool as a junior electrician in 1969. What a ship. The main engine was made by Krupp, I believe. It had electric winches, which was a first for its day. From what I was told it had been sunk in either Bremen or Hamburg harbour as a blockade then raised after the war. You could still see the bullet holes in the funnel. The junior electricians' cabin opened up straight onto the aft deck, so I had to keep my door locked at night to avoid being woken by the drunken engineers when they came back on board every night in search of beer."

John Sudds: "I sailed on the *Oakmore* in 1960. After the war she was refloated & bought by Furness Withy. I sailed on her on two separate occasions; the first trip I went into hospital in Cyprus to have my appendix out; came home DBS on another of the company ships. I rejoined her a few months later & did two more trips down the Meddy (Mediterranean) before I got itchy feet & moved on."

Captain Iain: "I was both deck apprentice and third mate on the *Oakmore* and was on her final voyage to the Breakers at Aviles, Northern Spain, 13 April 1967. She had indeed been sunk twice during the war, the first I believe by gunfire, bullet holes and buckled plates from the subsequent fire still evident. The second time as a blockship in the river Weser. We served on the North Atlantic timber trade and the Black Sea Service, operated by Furness Warren Line. An old but happy ship!"

Capt. Bob: "Don't forget that there was no ship's wheel, just a couple of buttons and the unwary would forget to press the opposite one to centre the rudder causing the OW (Old woman?) some concern."



Bill Elliott: "I sailed with her to the Black Sea. She could roll on glass. We had a fire on two generators. Two strokes. One ran away and set fire to the switch board. What a night! I think the chief was a Geordie but not too sure. Yes, she was some ship. We did a trip to Canada with two cars as our total cargo. When we got to Newfoundland our cargo was lifted out with a grab, a white and black mess."



**M.V. *Oakmore*** (courtesy 'Ships Nostalgia')

## REVENTAZON

of Elders and Fyffes, took Richard West Africa.

There was a little on-line chatter: "This ship started life in 1939 as the *Panther*, owned by F. Laeisz, Hamburg. In 1945 she was acquired as a war prize and renamed *Empire Mole*. In 1946 acquired by E&F renamed *Reventazon*. 1963 sold to Panama, renamed *Kimolos* (Greek flag), 1972 sold to Alimos Shipping & Trading, Greece renamed *Ikon Jan*, resold, renamed *Vassilia K*, 1973 then scrapped. "

"A fine-looking ship, a prize after the war, I believe there was some confusion down below as the valves and such were still marked in the German language and to make matters worse some jokers had swapped the labels around."

<https://www.shipsnostalgia.com/threads/reventazon.3125/>

However.... *Reventazon*, in a small way, played its part in an intrepid adventure.

"I am very optimistic about the flight", said 51-year-old Mr Arnold "Bushy" Elloart in November 1958, who along with three others, his son, Tim Elloart, 21, Colin Mudie, 32, and his wife Rosemary, planned to cross the Atlantic in a hydrogen filled balloon. "Bushy" and Mr & Mrs Mudie boarded the *Reventazon* in Southampton (the younger Elloart was due to

join them later). With them was 45 tons of gear and five hundredweight of food for the crossing. On board ship they were entertained to a celebratory cocktail:

“six tots of Jamaica Rum, a small tin of evaporated milk, a dash of angostura bitters, crushed ice, a glass of sweet vermouth. Shake well and stand clear.”

Much was made of Mrs Mudie, 30, being a woman. The record of her press interview is cringeworthy.

“I am afraid I might forget something really important - like my lipstick,’ she said.” (Alleged. I’d like to think she was having them on.)

To a really intrusive question, she was too polite. “If I have to change when everyone is awake, they will have to turn their backs, but we will be two-on, two-off, on watch, and my usual partner will be my husband.”

The quartet left the *Reventazon* at Teneriffe, which proceeded uneventfully onward to Africa. Canarian details of the arrangements for assembly of the ballooning gear and the departure are lacking. Then, after Christmas, the press went wild with speculation as to their fate.

“The adventurers had crashed!” “They were missing, believed lost in the jungle of South America!” “They were found in Eastern Venezuela after a successful crossing!”<sup>6</sup>

.....which only goes to show, as if you didn’t know already, beware of what you read in the papers.

Colin Mudie died aged 93, a famous seafarer, survived by Rosemary, his wife of 65 years. According to his obituary in *Sail World Cruising*, 7 April 2020, the hydrogen balloon (risky, and anticipating Richard Branson years later) had stayed aloft for 94 hours. They did indeed crash, but in the sea. The gondola had been cunningly designed to do service as a boat and they continued onward by sea, arriving safely to a rapturous welcome in Barbados, 5 January 1959.

For more this story, see <https://www.bajanthings.com/the-small-world-crossing-of-the-atlantic-dec-1958/>

**DALTONHALL**, Richard’s next ship, took him to Montreal.

The sight of this water colour of the *Daltonhall* painted by one of the engineers, Bill Wedgewood, <https://www.shipsnostalgia.com/threads/s-s-dalton-hall.305081/> reminded your blogger of her travel agency days (again). We once took on a young assistant who was not interested in the work, (customers,



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<sup>6</sup> Sunday Dispatch, 30.11.1958, Leicester Evening News, 29.11.58, Gloucester Citizen, Birmingham Post, 27.12.58, and others too numerous to mention.

arranging, booking, ticketing) or even travelling herself, but said “I like to look at pretty books about ships.” The girl left shortly of her own accord, but the painting would doubtless have found favour with her romantic soul. In truth, though the following do not figure among Richard’s remembrances, life aboard *Daltonhall* would hardly inspire the sunny quote at the top of this piece, “it could never happen to us.”

In 1951, Robert Thomas Morris, a seaman from Cotham, Bristol, was mid-Atlantic aboard the *Daltonhall*, Avonmouth bound, when he fell thirty feet down a hatchway. He suffered injuries to his spine and shoulder, with his kneecap and both his feet broken. He sued Hartlepool Steam Company for negligence. When the case came to judgement in 1954, he was still only 21, and could barely walk. He was awarded £10,900 damages. (Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail, 27.7.1954)

John Thomas Farquharson, a donkey greaser, was injured, when working aboard the same ship, though less severely. He slipped off a ladder and fell to the deck, breaking his arm and injuring his feet. He was treated in hospital in Montreal. His arm was in plaster for three months during which he could not work. He sued the company, (alleging an unsafe ladder and poor lighting), presumably for loss of wages, £900. His claim was dismissed, as “sheer bad luck”. (Hartlepool N.D.M. 31.10.1956).

Tragedy occurred in heavy weather mid-Atlantic, in 1956, with the *Daltonhall*, six days out from New York, with a cargo of grain for Leith. An apprentice, the son of a Hartlepool pilot, Jeffrey Pounder, 17, was washed overboard. The lad had been at sea for a year. (Hartlepool N.D.M. 21.11.1956.)

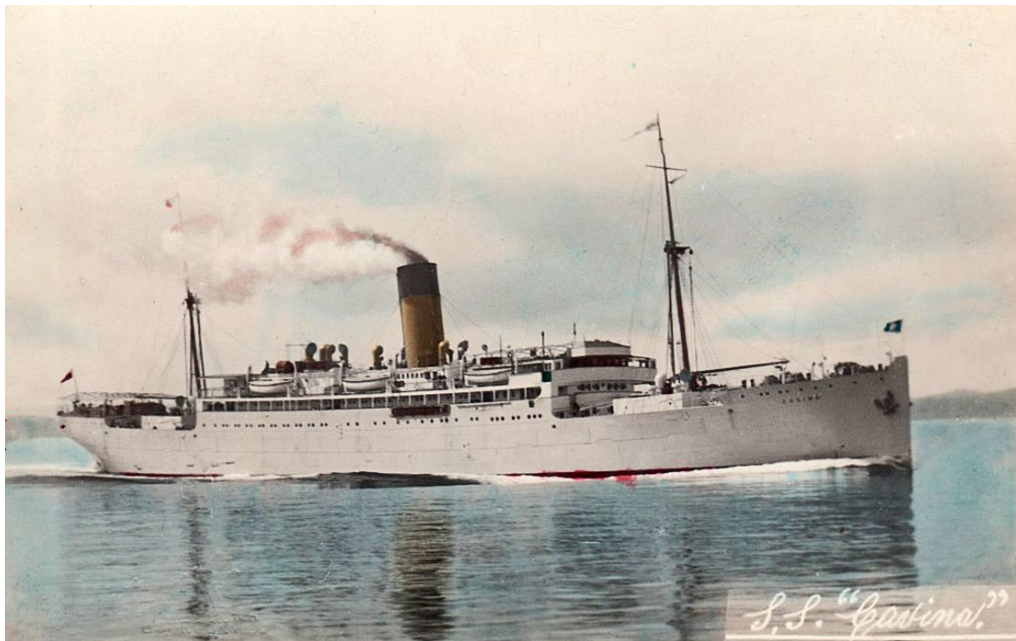
A lucky escaper, Jack Bremner, 39, a ship’s cook, of Edinburgh, fell from the gangway between his ship, the *Daltonhall* and another ship, at anchor in Leith. An alert night-watchman raised the alarm and wakened the crew who managed to haul Bremner to safety. (Edinburgh Evening News 3.12.1956)

## CAVINA

Richard sailed from Avonmouth to Jamaica with the S.S. *Cavina*..... before this Ray Buck of Pill served in the *Cavina*. His letter appeared in the Evening Post, 22 July 1989:

<p>● In July 1939, as a callow 17-year-old, I was aboard the SS <i>Cavina</i>, pictured left, in her home port of Avonmouth.</p> <p>One day the marine superintendent, Captain Castle, asked for volunteers to take a fortnight’s gunnery course on HMS <i>Flying Fox</i> in Bristol.</p> <p>I stepped forward, and I remember that when we were traversing the three-inch A-A gun we would get derisory comments from the young girls using the</p>	<p>Mardyke Ferry on their way to work.</p> <p>The course over and the proud possessor of a gunnery certificate, I joined the <i>Camito</i>, another Elders and Fyffes banana ship, and we were in the British West Indies when war was declared.</p> <p>Homeward bound we slapped gallons of Admiralty grey paint all over the immaculate white of the ship, much to the chagrin of the chief officer.</p> <p>Steaming at full speed and</p>	<p>zig-zagging gave us an insight of what was to come — as, even more ominously, did the sight of a huge oil slick, all that remained of the Bowerings tanker <i>Regent Panther</i> — or was it <i>Jaguar</i>?</p> <p>A familiar Avonmouth-based ship, she was torpedoed by a U-Boat, and so many Fyffes ships went the same way.</p> <p><b>Ray Buck</b></p> <p>Bull Lane, Pill, Bristol.</p>
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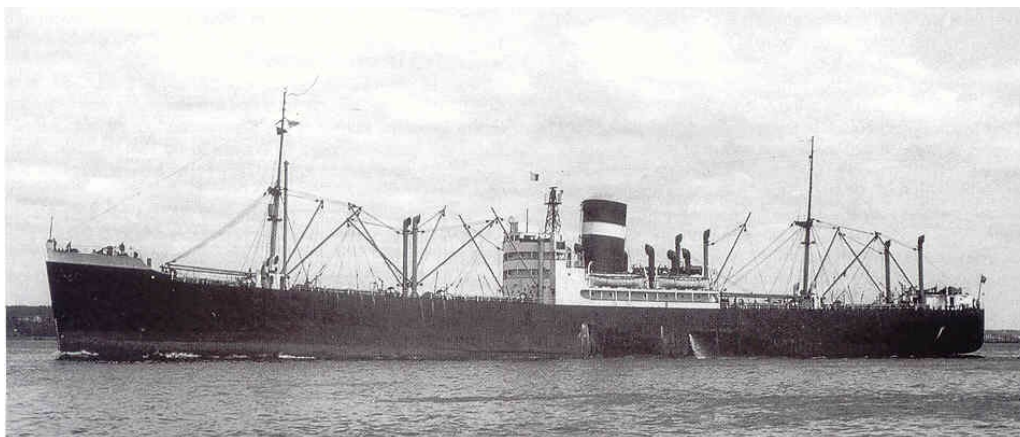
*Cavina*, originally owned by Elders & Fyffes, was broken up in 1958.



**The Screw Steamer 'Cavina, Leaving Avonmouth for Jamaica.**  
(<https://www.clydeships.co.uk/view.php?ref=17027>)

.....but it was starting to get more difficult. After almost a thousand years, Bristol seamen like Richard Hendy would soon be a lost breed of men.

Richard was no longer working in the galley, stewarding. "I just got tired of it. Wanted a change. To get a new experience," but he chose an even tougher environment, down in the engine room in the bowels of the ship as a "fireman" otherwise a stoker: "If you went ashore you had to hand your bedding in, or they would steal it. To buy drink."



## **SALACIA**

a steel motor vessel which crossed the Atlantic, St John's Newfoundland to Glasgow. Richard sailed twice with this vessel, with general cargo, and then back to Avonmouth. *Salacia* was newsworthy on several occasions, bringing importing Cheddar Cheese across the Atlantic

from Canada, (Evening Post 9.8.1957), Shame! Coals to Newcastle, even though rationing was abolished in 1954.

More particularly, *Salacia* was specially adapted, to carry live animals. A hundred and sixty Shetland ponies, then allegedly the largest ever shipment of horses, was exported to Montreal (18.3.1957). Shetlands were “an important dollar trade for children and riding” (28.10.1957) - a comforting assertion, perhaps inserted to allay letters of protest from concerned readers imagining a worse fate? The number of horses would be superseded (25 10.1957) when the ship, just arrived and unloading grain, was scheduled to take on 227 Dartmoor, Exmoor and Welsh ponies for the return voyage.

Then cattle. In a rough crossing which took 10 days, (Evening Post 3.11.1959) twenty-nine polled heifers (without horns) were imported Montreal to Glasgow and travelled onward 370 miles to Eastleach in Gloucestershire by lorry. The breeder, Mr Burton V. Warnica who travelled with the cows was the guest of Mr & Mrs F.J. Honour for the weekend. <sup>7</sup>

*Salacia* was broken up in 1960.

Richard’s final ships in which he crossed the Atlantic again and again were even less memorable than before, but perhaps he was getting tired.

### **TETELA, Jamaica-Garston**

With matters getting “back to normal” *Tetela* carried members of the MCC (captained by “Gubby” Allen) for matches in the West Indies. (Gloucester Echo 4.6.1946)

The *Tetela* was nicknamed ‘The Zoo Ship’ when she brought in a cargo of giant turtles, destined for Paignton Zoo. It is difficult to see how the ship managed the creatures (under sedation?) They presented problems when they arrived. The zoo pool was not large enough for them, and they had to be accommodated in a local swimming bath at Paignton. (Bristol Evening Post, 1.9.1949)

During WW2, *Tetela*, small, refrigerated cargo ship had survived a torpedo attack in the North Sea during the Second World War. She was damaged, taken in tow, and beached on the Haile Sand Flat; refloated the next day, she was taken to Hull.

She was finally broken up at Ghent, Belgium on 4 August 1959.

**NEW YORK CITY, (twice) New York-Avonmouth.** Sister of Gloucester City. She was the 5<sup>th</sup> flag ship of the Hill City Line to bear this name, (Evening Post 13.1.1956)

### **SALACIA, (again)**

### **MATINA, Jamaica-Garston**

One of Fyffes’ banana boats... see “Bananas!” above.

### **MONTREAL CITY, Montreal-Avonmouth**

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<sup>7</sup> By coincidence, I have a family connection with Mrs & Mrs F.J. Honour, about which there will be a separate blog.



In September 1959 a man became trapped in the two-foot space between Montreal City and Manistee when they lay side by side in dock. John Cornwall, 49, a seaman from Liverpool had been on a run ashore and, trying to take a short cut to his own ship, the Tulip Glen made a fool hardy attempt to leap the four-foot gap between the two larger ships. Two men working on the ships, Jock Haigh, 60, a fitter and William Richard Applin, 29, an electrician, clambered out on to the fender and were able to throw a rope to Cornwall, who was still conscious. They managed to haul him up. He was taken to BRI, and after examination was discharged suffering from shock and a bruised head, exceptionally lucky to be alive. (Evening Post, 7.9.1959).

**MANISTEE, (twice) Jamaica-Garston, Jamaica**

**BIRMINGHAM CITY, (twice) Halifax, Nova Scotia-London, Montreal-London**

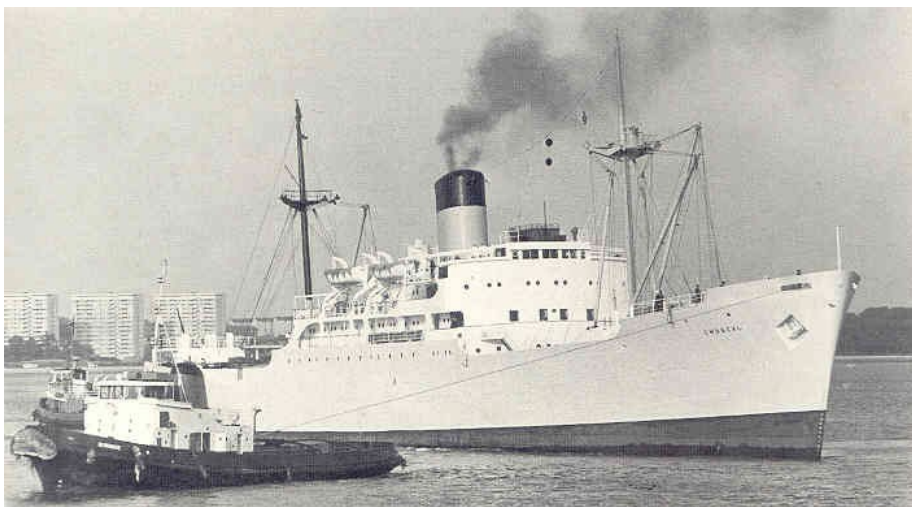
**MATINA (again)**

**WELLPARK, the South Atlantic. Vitoria, Brazil - Middlesborough.**

I can only find one mention of *Wellpark*, and it was after Richard's time. The ship, in the rich tradition of the sea, received the Royal Humane Society's bronze medal for saving 346 Vietnamese 'boat people'. Certificates were awarded to the 50 members of the crew. (Liverpool Daily Post, 8.2.1979)

One can only imagine Richard's numerous train journeys from Bristol to other UK ports: "Have kitbag, will travel." The local shipping industry was dying, the little steamers and their cargos of 'smalls' were no longer viable. Large container ships were the in-thing. Again, finding nothing suiting his needs and experience going anywhere, Richard worked ashore again, first for the Gas Company, then in the wide-open green space of Bristol Downs as a Park Ranger.

But you can't keep an old seadog away. It seems to be a drug. Jamaica beckoned again and he made three voyages aboard the **CHUSCAL**.



**S.T. Chuscal** (courtesy <https://iancoombe.tripod.com/id14.html> chuscal)

Richard is ambivalent regarding the natural hazards of life at sea, and reiterates, "I was lucky; I got away with it." A horrific incident aboard *Chuscal* occurred after his three voyages in the ship.

On 12 April 1966, coincidentally the same year that Richard came ashore for the final time, *Chuscal* was involved in tragedy when five crew members were washed overboard during a storm on a voyage from Kingston, Jamaica to Avonmouth. The Bosun, an AB, a Deck hand and two Apprentices had gone on deck to secure horse boxes when they were swept away by a huge wave. The master, Captain John Beatson, was faced with...

"...the impossible decision of whether to turn the ship around with a high probability of capsizing or leaving the five men at the mercy of the waves. With a heavy heart he resolved he could not turn the ship and risk the lives of all those remaining on board. All five men perished, and their bodies were never recovered."

The ship was 520 miles south-east of Newfoundland on course from Jamaica to Avonmouth.

In 2018 a special tree, dedicated to the five men whose bodies were never found was placed in the Merchant Navy Wood at the National Memorial Arboretum for those lost at sea. They were:

William Leslie Harvey,

Alan Moodie,

Andrew Self,

Michael Sydney Smith,

and Richard Mark Willcock.

Michael Smith's mother, Mrs Lily O'Brien, lived at Lawrence Weston. Eleanor S. Cockle, on behalf of Bristol Seamen Women's Guild wrote to the Evening Post advising them of a fund being raised for Smith's young son, Kevin. Another crew member, Allan Willcock, who by coincidence shared the same surname as the deceased Richard, an apprentice, attended the ceremony. He had been on deck at the time of the tragedy and narrowly escaped the fate of his namesake. He was mistakenly reported among those who were drowned. When the ship docked his mother, Mrs May Willcock of Hartcliffe, could not believe her eyes when she saw him walking down the gangplank! He was 17 at the time. (Evening Post 18.3.& 3.5. 1966)

It is alleged that it was Captain Beatson's first time in command of the *Chuscal*. He is believed to have left the sea after the tragedy.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Dave Beaumont writing to Ships Nostalgia in 2007, and in 2018, [www.staffordshire-live.co.uk/news/local-news/ss-chuscal-freighter](http://www.staffordshire-live.co.uk/news/local-news/ss-chuscal-freighter)

## BULLFINCH

Richard's penultimate ship was S.S. *Bullfinch*, (Plymouth, English Channel, Atlantic Ocean). During the height of the Cold War, this was a highly unusual assignment, working for the Admiralty in submarine detection, but the prime purpose was laying communication cables. The ship was anchored mid-Atlantic. It brought back memories of the U-boats which had been forever lurking when he was a boy sailor. This time it was still all very hush-hush. Richard felt the Russians were always nosing about the ship as they worked.



Cable Layer. Formerly HMS Bullfinch, an RN ship, <https://atlantic-cable.com/Cableships/Bullfinch/index.htm>

## CHIRIPPO

Richard's final voyage was in 1966, something of a whimper, for I can find nothing about S.T. *Chirippo*, which I assume was an oil tanker. She fittingly sailed Avonmouth, Panama Canal, Almirante, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Texas. Back to Panama, Avonmouth and, for the last time, home.

Fortunately, when he finally came home, both his parents were still living. Mabel Hendy died in 1975 and Albert only a year later.

Richard still rides his bicycle, "just to get my paper in the morning", he says, and he "does the gardening", for his sister, Ruth. Remarkably she too, is alive, one year his senior, and in good health.

"On your bike?" I would not have put it past him.

"No!" he laughs "Too far from Longwell Green. She lives at Easton."

He has survived so far with hardly a scratch. I think he may well be immortal.

He says: "I've had a wonderful life. I wouldn't change a thing."

***"Home is the sailor, home from the sea***

***And the hunter, home from the hill."***

(Robert Louis Stevenson)

Notes:

For full details of the Norwegian tankers, see:

<https://www.maritimebergen.no/den-norske-uteflaten-under-2-erdenskrig/>

<https://www.warsailors.com/singleships/tanafjord.html>

Norhboat olm: <https://www.warsailors.com/singleships/norholm.html>

The Norwegian film “War Sailor” is available on Netflix.