

By the time I had reached fifteen years of age, I was beginning to tire of school. It was no surprise therefore, to find me down at Gloucester Docks most days, bunking off school. Watching, what to me were, the huge oil tanker barges, just fitting into the lock, on their way up river to Worcester. The tugs towing a string of lighters, full with timber, Dutch coasters, unloading their cargoes in the docks. Names such as KINGSDALE H, BP MANUFACTURER, ADDIE, MARCONI, all logged in my notebook.

It was the oil barges that held my interest. Where did these great black vessels come from and where were they going? Who owned them and how did I get a job on one? The tankers were owned by John Harker Ltd of Knottingley, Yorkshire and their South West office was here in Gloucester. When I left school in the July of 1960, I went to see the manager, Fred Collins. He told me it was a hard life, but as I was persistent he finally agreed to take me on as "fourth hand".

So at seven-thirty one bright September morning in 1960 I left home to join the SHELL STEELMAKER at Monk Meadow Dock, Gloucester. Walking down the quay wall I heard the beat of engines, then I saw her, propeller turning, a spring rope holding her to the wall. The skipper, Bill Screech, shouted to me, "Come on lad, we'll miss the first lock at Sharpness".



SHELL STEELMAKER

I had been sent to join the SHELL STEELMAKER the day before as relief deckhand. She carried a crew of five men, the deckhand I replaced was on sick leave having injured his eye in an accident in the engine room.

The first person to greet me was the engineer, Alf Hook, who showed me to my cabin, then told me that there was a cup of tea in the galley. I later learned that we were to pick the mate and other deckhand up at Sharpness. So feeling all alone I found my way to the galley and faced the strange brew of ships tea. Thick, strongly brewed tea with Nestles sweet condensed milk, a taste never to be forgotten. We picked up the other two crew members at Sharpness, locked out into the Severn Estuary, then full ahead to Swansea. It was late evening as we sailed into Swansea Bay with a spectacular firework display to greet us.

I stayed on the STEELMAKER for three weeks, the crew having to put up with my continual tiredness, the long hours being the first disadvantage that I found with the job. On about my second or third trip we were going to leave Gloucester at five in the morning. I arrived at Monk Meadow just after five and discovered the STEELMAKER had gone! They had gone without me. In future I made sure that I was aboard in plenty of time before sailing. One night at Sharpness the skipper and engineer went ashore for a drink and came back drunk. The skipper

was sick over the stern, losing his teeth in the process. The engineer, with whom I shared a cabin, marched up and down with a twelve bore rifle over his shoulder!

My next tanker was the WYESDALE H. I joined her at Gloucester Lock one evening and introduced myself to the crew. Her skipper was "Sunny" Sunderland, who hardly said a word to me for a long time. Later I was to find out why. The reason for his quietness was the rest of the crew. There was Garth the engineer, always at loggerheads with Sunny and the mate "Stormy" Waters, he would side with Garth whenever there was any trouble. Mind you, Sunny wasn't perfect, mostly when he was on the wheel. In the wheelhouse on his own and wanting a pee, he would open the door and aim for the side from there. One day whilst discharging at Worcester the pump drive belt broke, which was quite a common occurrence.



Chris Witts on WYESDALE H

On this particular day Garth told me to close the shore valve, but as I was about to, Sunny came on deck and ordered me to leave it open. This put me in a spot, if I obeyed one, I would get a clout from the other! This time I needn't have worried, Garth came out of the engine room hatch, Sunny out of the accommodation and they both ran at each other with fists flying. By this time it was too late to worry about the valve, so I discreetly vanished.

I shall never forget the disaster that happened when on my first trip in fog. We left Avonmouth on the WYESDALE H the evening of 25th October 1960 with a large number of other craft bound for Sharpness. On clearing the locks I went down below with the mate, leaving Sunny on the wheel. A couple of hours later the bell in the accommodation began to ring frantically. I went on deck and was surprised to find a thick fog. The skipper told me to get the mate on deck and stand watch on the bow. Apparently we were off Berkeley Power Station, but it was so thick that I lost all bearings as to where we were. Stormy Waters told me to listen for Sharpness fog siren.

Suddenly I saw a tankers bow coming out of the fog straight for us, I shouted to the skipper, but it was too late. Crash, their bow hit ours, I read the name WASTDALE H. Their fourth hand, Malcolm Hart, put a fender over the side to soften the blow, but it was cut in two. He shouted to me, "Never mind, that's another job to do later. I will see you tomorrow at Gloucester". He never survived to see tomorrow. His barge went on up towards the Severn Bridge and with the ARKENDALE H they both hit the bridge, bringing two spans down and causing an explosion. The first we knew of it was a dull thud and the sky being lit up with flames. On docking at Sharpness we were told that two tankers were missing, although shocked, there was nothing we could do.

The following morning my parents heard the news on the radio, five killed out of the two crews. They set off for Harker's offices at Monk Meadow and on the way the lock keeper at Gloucester Lock told them that the WYESDALE H had been lost with all hands. What a shock for them, but what a relief when they saw us coming up the canal.

The WYESDALE H was built for only running down as far as Avonmouth, so it became a bit tedious at times, however we had our moments. Like the time coming down the swollen Severn from Worcester on a dark night with only a pair of car lamps fitted to the bow to assist the helmsman. Expecting to go through Upper Lode Lock I was surprised when Sunny went to port and shot over the weir! Another time in the dark whilst coming down river, I was walking from the wheelhouse to the accommodation when my feet shot from under me. I went straight through the rails, just managing to hold on with my finger tips. No one saw me fall and it was quite a while before I managed to scramble back on board.



WYESDALE H at Worcester, as she was built

During the period that I worked on the River Severn there were plenty of other craft operating besides John Harker's, for instance there were the Regent tankers trading between Avonmouth and Stourport. British Waterways with tugs and dumb barges plus a few motor barges and also grain barges belonging to local mills. At Sharpness during tide time it was common to have two full locks of craft locking down, whilst a large number of craft would be waiting in the river to enter the lock. On occasions with large numbers of vessels leaving Sharpness it would be necessary to operate a third lock. That meant that if you were bound for Avonmouth the barge had to tie on Avonmouth Pier until first lock next tide.

It was in the April of 1961 that the WYESDALE H entered Gloucester Dry-dock to be rebuilt with a raised forecastle. This would allow the barge to trade to Swansea. We were in dock for eleven weeks. The rest of the crew were found other berths, but I remained on board and painted all the accommodation. Towards the end of the eleven weeks George Thompson appeared on board. "I'm your new skipper", he announced. I began to quake in my shoes. For he had been skipper of the ARKENDALE H when she was lost in the Severn Bridge disaster and since then I had been in awe of him. The mate was Mike Edwards of Lydney, strong as an ox, he played rugby for Lydney and had just joined Harker's after a lifetime in the Bristol Channel on coal barges. Our engineer was to be Gerry Sullivan. He hated rough weather. If a gale was forecast,

no one must tell him for he would keep pestering the skipper to turn back to seek shelter. This was the crew I was to stay with for a few years and I enjoyed their company very much.



WYESDALE H rebuilt to run down to Swansea

What had happened to Sunny Sunderland? A few months after we began running the WYESDALE H again, we were running down the Welsh coast when I spotted another Harker barge close by. On glancing across I could see Sunny working on deck, apparently this was the only berth that was offered

to him. I felt sorry for him as I knew that he hated the thought of running down to Swansea. It was soon after this that he left the company and took a job as a petrol pump attendant. He died soon after, who knows, maybe from a broken heart?

Working down to Swansea meant long hours. We had a system of two up working and two down below sleeping. Sleep could be anything from one hour to four, eight was a luxury. The accommodation was good on the tanker barges. On the WYESDALE H a cabin each, messroom, galley and wash/toilet. It was the fourth hands job to keep the accommodation clean. He was also known as the “boy” and amongst his other jobs were deck work, steering, cooking and looking after the engine. Not forgetting the

loading, unloading and running errands ashore. He was there to be shouted at, not to speak unless spoken to, to work most hours of the day and night. There were three good meals each day, with boiled ham for tea followed by George Thompson's speciality of rice and pineapple cubes. Water was something we had to use sparingly, with only a small fresh water tank and few places to fill it

from. One way to save it was to use water from the after peak ballast tank. It was not fit for drinking, but ideal for using for washing up, etc.

Like all hard working men we enjoyed a drop of beer. My first encounter with a pint was at Sharpness. We weren't sailing until 2am so off we all went to the Pier View Hotel. On returning to the WYESDALE H I felt ill! At sailing time the mate was having no nonsense, “Get up on deck and let go the ropes”, he shouted. It was a pity that I didn't remember this episode a few months later. One lunchtime whilst discharging at Newport the skipper and mate decided to go ashore for a drink. I was shutting the tank lids when on glancing down the road I could see the skipper carrying the mate across his back, completely blotto. He was taken to his cabin and that was the last we saw of him for many hours, in fact not until we were tied on the berth at Swansea. This meant that I had to work twice as hard, something he didn't want to do some months previous.

It was at Newport that I had a lucky escape, or rather the skipper nearly had some explaining

to do. The WYESDALE H was lying aground waiting for the tide at the Fina berth at the top of the River Usk near the town bridge. Due to sail at midnight the crew decided to go across the road for a drink, leaving me to look after the barge. To get up to the quay two long ladders had been lashed together, making it a precarious climb up. I was lying on my bunk having a little sleep when I heard a loud crash and scraping of metal. Had I been dreaming? I rushed on deck and saw that we were afloat and drifting towards the town bridge. Start the engine I thought, but it would not fire. Into the wheelhouse and blow the whistle, hoping to summon the crew back. Back down the engine-room and try again, still no luck, so up to the wheelhouse and blow that whistle. By this time we were drifting along a sand dredger tied up astern of us. Out of breath with exhaustion and worry I saw the mate take a leap from the dredger onto our deck. Without saying anything to him I went back to the engine and thankfully it started. The skipper said later that they had heard the whistle from the public house and guessed something must be wrong. Luckily they did or the barge and I could have ended up being jammed under the road bridge.

Another night not to be forgotten was that of 19th November 1961. We had left Sharpness that evening with the WYESDALE H bound for Swansea. As we were abreast of Berkeley Power Station we decided to lash ourselves to the WHARFEDALE H so that only one man was required to steer two barges, a practise that was frowned upon. The WHARFEDALE H was an old barge with just the one cabin up in the bow. This was where I was when we all heard an extraordinary noise. Rushing up on deck we could see that we had collided with a rescue launch and that it was wedged between the two barges. One man was stood on the wreckage, whom we quickly hauled aboard our barge, another man was drifting out in the river. Unfortunately we were unable to save him and his body was never recovered. The rescue launch was used during the construction of the Severn Suspension Bridge and before the collision was going from Aust to Beachley. The helmsman thought that our navigation lights were from cars on the road at Beachley.

Although the WYESDALE H had been rebuilt to run down to Swansea, she still had the old "handraulic" winch for raising the anchor. Rather than anchor we used to lie on Swansea Pier, loaded, whilst waiting for the right state of tide to assist us back up the Bristol Channel. The skipper would leave moving off the pier to the very last minute, any longer and we risked grounding as we moved down the fairway! One night as we moved onto the pier I was told to remain on watch whilst the rest of the crew turned in and to make sure I called the skipper at precisely 2am. Needless to say I fell asleep. I awoke at twenty past two, started the engine and went to call the skipper. His cabin was off the messroom, which had the ships clock on the bulkhead. Knowing that the first thing he did on leaving his cabin was to look at the clock, I turned it back to 2am. Ignorance is bliss, he never knew the real time, but I did. Until we reached the outer fairway buoy, I had fingers and toes crossed!

Most Harker men had nicknames, the skipper's was "Horace" and "Oscar". I once called him Horace whilst asking him a question. He flared up at me yelling, "Don't ever call me that again. You address me as skipper or skip, but nothing else"

The time for leaving Gloucester on a typical Swansea to Worcester trip would be dictated by the time of the tide at Sharpness. The most common time to leave always seemed to be the

unearthly hour of five in the morning. In which case I would be back on board the night before, hoping for a lie-in the following morning. This depended on the mood of the skipper. The skipper and mate shared the job of steering down the Gloucester & Sharpness Ship Canal and my job was to keep them supplied with hot tea. Breakfast was timed shortly before arriving at Sharpness. Eggs, bacon, blackpudding, fried bread, baked beans, no matter what time of day, breakfast was never missed. The run down the canal took three hours and normally it was straight into the lock and out into the Severn Estuary.

There may have been as many as six barges waiting in the lock together. They would proceed in a single line to the outer gates, then out between the piers to meet the full force of the tide. Craft with low power or damaged propellers would almost stop. All skippers winding up to full throttle, the beat of the engines were deafening. Slowly the craft sorted themselves out and in no time the faster craft were disappearing over the horizon. The skipper steered until abreast of Avonmouth, then the mate took over. Meanwhile I would be cleaning the accommodation, polishing the brass and preparing the mid-day meal. The afternoon would be spent on deck, painting, splicing or steering. Alone in the wheelhouse, steering down the Bristol Channel, was one of the most pleasurable parts of the job. As long as the weather was good.

The run to Swansea normally took nine hours depending on weather conditions. One trip took over fifteen hours during a south-westerly gale. If a gale was forecast, we would put further ballast in the barge by filling one of the cargo tanks with sea water. Normally by the time Barry was reached, a decision had been made to go windbound, either in the docks or shelter near Penarth. Many was the time though that we carried on down channel in a gale, trying hard to get through the narrow gap at the Nash. The sea and wind here was frightening, the barge would be thrown around, lying on her side one second, the bow high out of the water the next. Sometimes the barge would be making no headway, then we would try to turn around and race back to Barry. I don't know which I feared the most, gales or fog?

As we entered the fairway at Swansea, the mate and I would have to bring all the mooring ropes up from the focsle locker ready for mooring on the piers. There was a wait for a couple of hours until first lock, then if you were lucky it was straight into the Queens Dock and onto the berth. Loading the vessel didn't take long, between one and two hours. All power on the barge had to be shut down, with a room provided on shore for making tea and cooking meals. The petroleum spirit came in so fast and at such pressure that the jetty man needed ten minutes warning before he could shut down.

The mate normally loaded the barge and during the early hours of one morning Mike Edwards had a slight accident! The jetty man was celebrating the win by his local rugby team. In due course he fell asleep in his warm hut and at 2am Mike did the same in the wheelhouse. A manager in the terminal office, half a mile away, smelt petrol fumes. On investigating he found a fountain of petrol gushing from one of our sight holes into the air. Fortunately, whilst the shore personnel were still in shock, we sailed for Bridgwater, but later learned that the Queens Dock was closed for some time whilst the surface of the water was cleared of spirit. We didn't see Gloucester for quite some time after that. Fred Collins kept us working down channel until his temper had calmed down!

It was surprising to find that a lot of the tankermen could not swim, myself included. One

Friday morning in 1963 as I left home, my mother called me back. She seemed agitated, apparently she had dreamt that night of me falling out of the sky and drowning. Women, I thought and carried on. We were bound for Avonmouth to load a cargo for Barry, then onto Swansea where we arrived Sunday morning. As was usual for the first lock there were many small ships locking in. We were told to tie alongside the BP DISTRIBUTOR, already moored half way along the lock. My skipper told me to go aboard her and read what our draught aft was. I decided to go the quick way, straight up the side of her hull. As I grasped the top rail, it came away in my hand and I fell down between the two vessels into the water. I hit the water feet first and went straight down, but soon popped up to the surface again. I was on the surface long enough to see faces peering at me from the ships in the lock. Then I sank again, more slowly this time with visions of my family in my head. I was holding my breath, then decided to give in as I couldn't hold it any longer. As all this was happening I must have been drifting back up to the surface again, for I suddenly felt someone pulling me. A seaman from the BP DISTRIBUTOR had jumped in to save me, although I don't know who he was, I have a lot to thank him for. I was given a good telling off for climbing up onto the ship, it was also pointed out to me that the outer lock gates were being closed. Another minute and the sluices would have been open, letting in thousands of gallons of water. That I would not have survived. Take heed of women's dreams.

One other unpleasant berth was National Benzole at the top of the River Ely at Cardiff. We would motor up the narrow and twisting river on the flood tide, turn the barge around and drop onto the jetty. Adjacent to National Benzole was a horrible, stinking tannery factory with a disgusting yellow substance running down the bank. Not many of us ventured ashore at this berth. Normally the barge could be discharged and run back down the river on the ebb. On one trip to this berth we arrived later than usual and did not swing around. After discharging the skipper decided to risk going back down the river stern first. The water in the river was dropping out fast, leaving us very little room to manoeuvre. With still quite a way to go we got stuck across the river with the threat of breaking our back. Luck was with us that day. We managed to slip back into the channel with only minutes to spare!

It took about nine hours to run back up to Sharpness from Swansea. Arriving anytime after 8pm meant an overnight stop and a 5am start the next morning. Up the canal to Gloucester, lock down into the Severn for the six hour trip to Worcester. We became bargemen now, the fourth hand having to assist each lock keeper with the locks. At Upper Lode lock it was a case of climbing up a rope on the gate, as the barge passed through, close the gate, drop the paddles and go to the top gate to reverse the procedure. Once at Worcester it was a question of squeezing into Diglis Basin with the other tanker barges and connecting the discharge pipe to supply Shell, Esso, etc.

Quite often we had a night ashore at Worcester with a few drinks in the pub and on to the Chinese restaurant in the High Street. A pleasant, civilised evening, not the bar room brawls we encountered in the Bristol Channel ports. Then it was up for a 5am run back down river to Gloucester. If the river was in flood, the barge would be ballasted down by putting river water in the cargo tanks and dropping the wheelhouse down. This still didn't give us much clearance under the bridges. On arriving at Gloucester Quay, the ballast water would be pumped out over the side before locking in. The road was a lot lower than with the river, when in flood, covering it, with people in the houses opposite marooned for days or weeks.

During 1962 the ROSEDALE H was sent from the Mersey to trade on the Severn. Mersey barges had to have ballast wing tanks alongside the cargo tanks before they could operate on

the Manchester Ship Canal. These wing tanks also had tank tops on the main deck, which were a great obstruction. The

ROSEDALE H had a tall funnel and lifeboats on the afterdeck, these had to be removed before she could work up the Severn to Worcester. The accommodation was not as good as the WYESDALE H, I had to share a cabin with the mate. But she was strong. During her conversion for the Severn a variable pitch propeller was fitted. It was never a great success as we found to our cost. One morning at Swansea I was on the phone at the lock side when I heard an almighty crash. On looking over the side I could see that the ROSEDALE H had entered the lock, hitting several Dutch coasters on the way through. The propeller gearing had jammed.

Having recovered from that, we loaded and made our way back to sail on the last lock of the tide. The Harbour Master jokingly told us to go careful and that he had kept the lock empty for us. The skipper warned myself and Mike to standby with the anchor and to let go if required. Half way down the lock we felt the ROSEDALE H surge ahead, Horace shouted to stand back as the barge raced towards the outer gates and surely into the Bristol Channel below. Fortunately the skipper kept his cool and aimed the barge for the large coping stone set into the lock wall. The stone was lifted out of its bed of mortar, yet there was no damage to the ROSEDALE H!

We were bound for the River Ely at Cardiff, the river with those notorious sharp bends. Horace told me to stay in the engine room whilst going up the river and he would ring a sequence of signals on the bell

for me to operate the propeller gearing manually. Of course I became confused with all the different rings he was giving me, so after a long gap I went up on deck to see where we were. Disaster, we had over shot the berth and were amongst the yachts at anchor.

The following day we returned to Swansea to see the Harbour Master standing on the lockside shouting through his loud hailer for us to go away. We ignored him, proceeding down the fairway and tying up in the lock. We all remained on the ROSEDALE H until 1963, of which that year began with a very cold spell. Three months of snow, ice and winds. Although British Waterways converted one of their steam tugs to an icebreaker, the canal still froze over. We would travel in convoy down the canal with the tug leading us through the ice. Even with vessels slowly going through the ice, men were able to walk alongside the barge. For one short period even the tug was unable to break the ice, trapping craft in the canal. Down channel things were just as bad. I recall coming up through the Nash against a Northerly wind in the early hours of the morning when the sea spray was freezing as it came over the barge.

The front of the wheelhouse had to be dropped so that Mike Edwards, who was on the wheel, could see. The poor man, stood there, wearing his old Bristol Omnibus coat, freezing to death.



ROSEDALE H (left - leaving Sharpness
& right - leaving Swansea)

Springtime in 1963 and we all joined a new tanker, the WINDSDALE H. This was my favourite barge, a cabin to myself again and a lot more modern aids than the other tankers had. A large hydraulic winch meant that we could anchor and only one man needed to raise it, not like the “handraulic” type where four men took ages to get it up.

I stayed on the WINDSDALE H for the remainder of that year then decided to leave the company and try working ashore. Working ashore was never quite the same and I did miss the way of life that I had experienced on those barges. But life is full of strange fates. Thirty years later I found myself working on the Severn again, on Allied Mills, (more popular known as Healings of Tewkesbury), grain barges with yes, another old Harker man, Lionel Langford. I sometimes allow myself a little smile and think of how the old Harker men would handle today's bureaucracy, speed limits on the canal, short working days. Tempers would be fraught!



WINDSDALE H (left - leaving Sharpness & right - leaving Gloucester)

Taken from notes of 1970. Rewritten in 1994 and published in Sea Breezes in 1998/99.

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