

## **Dockyard Life in the Late Sixties**

**Doug Seymour**

After my initial 2 years in Flathouse Training Centre I entered the 'Yard via Unicorn Gate for the first time on January 10<sup>th</sup> 1966. From the stories among apprentices, warnings from instructors and the fact that a brother and an uncle had already trod similar paths I was well versed in the tales of 'Dockies' but I was also about to embark on learning some of the almost ethnological culture. It was after all a town and a tribe in its own right with infrastructure to match. For me, later visiting many of the stores of both the SNSO demand type and lay-apart stores plus, shall we say, obtaining vital supplies to furnish a keen interest in fishing and motorcycles, I became well aware of the range of facilities available. All the services of a community were there if you had the need of them or the desire. Yes, I was a fairly normal Engine Fitter & Turner Apprentice.

Having got over the shock of what warships look like during a refit and able to comprehend that each trade and service played its part in putting the vessel back together, my awareness also took in our working way of life. Please excuse me for not getting certain facts quite right as you remember them. I would like to recapture (not in any particular order) elements of the yard that filled the back drop to my days and about 12000 others like me.

The Dockyard internal ferry was a vital link which few used but ran its route including the road from Unicorn to the Main Gate and Fountain Lake Jetty. This vehicle was a Bedford Dormobile or at least the basic van version of this much loved campervan for the holidaying outdoor types of the period. In dark royal blue with 'Royal Navy' emblazoned on each side, varnished slatted benches on each interior side plus a steel step to the rear doors (keep your head down alighting or leaving) made a carriage of rare comfort especially when inclement conditions prevailed. On the very few occasions I used it a certain gentleman of advanced years with wire rimmed bottle bottom glasses, 'pusser's' raincoat and mandatory frayed flat cap was always seated holding the same 'pusser's' tool bag. If it weren't for the lack of a bed roll and billycan I may have concluded he lived on it!

An initial mystery to me was the sight of amazingly well crafted Duffle Bags on the shoulders of many in the daily ebb and flow of in and out muster. The solid tanned leather construction, brass eyelets and leather strap were far above the quality obtainable in any city retail outlets and also made them very obvious. I was later informed that this dockyard fashion accessory was the product of a skilled gentleman whose income must have been given a very useful boost, without overtime.....no surely not! Where on earth could such huge amounts of leather come from?! Okay I will stop there.

Spending some apprenticeship time in the MED factory meant access to stories of, and meeting, a few of its characters. This was an education in itself. I added the word 'caboose' (a hideaway or quiet spot for some inmates....sorry colleagues) to my vocabulary. My fitter Tom had a particularly well hidden version behind his vertical borer at the southern end of 4 Bay just beyond the shaft lathe, which in itself was a storage facility for devices related to crustacean 'study'. Okay then, the lower bed areas covered by bottom boards

to 'prevent the ingress of swarf,' was in fact the lobster pot stowage. Please don't jump to conclusions that these may have been fashioned from corrosion proof materials in the welding bay opposite. On the heavy machinery section night shift, a machine would be set up with the job, a cut was started and the pots were then deployed by bicycle around the outer dockyard walls like Fountain Lake jetty, returning in time to stop the machine, set the next cut and continue the 'study'. During the following night the rewards would be collected.

Because the gentlemen of this area were avid followers of all things marine I was forced, (against my will of course), to produce copious amounts of fishing weights in a single lunchtime. I recall being so impressed by the semi-automated weight mould, made as it was with one sliding element and a vice fixed end, that I laughed continuously as I poured molten material with one hand, operated the sliding element with the other and heard each lead drop with a hiss into the water bucket. It was all in the name of recycling. Something had to be done with the swarf from refurbished white metal bearings! One man from this happy band pursued his love of fishing by keeping his boat in the Dockyard Angling Club moorings outside No. 4 boathouse. Being fair and reasonable to his fellow workers he organised the manufacture, through the planning department and onto a bonus work card, the manufacture of new cylinder head studs for said boat. No I am not kidding.....or saying more! And no I can't get you a set made either. It was not surprising that with the number of 'Rabbits' (personal jobs) being made some workshop areas would be referred to as 'The Warren'.

My marine studies were not complete. The Boiler Shop, not far away, provided the ideal gauge of stainless from which to fashion, by hand, very successful flounder spoons, a fisherman's essential. So I would nonchalantly amble over and turn myself upside down in the scrap bin to acquire the right stuff. No one would have noticed the protruding inverted legs topped by size 9 steel toe capped boots.

Another observation of mine was to see the (usually blue) vans of the Naval Outfitters (remember Bernards) attending near the gangway of commissioned ships alongside and the eager sailors buying real 'fab' gear to go ashore with the perfect outfit to impress. The fact that they seemed to try on, purchase and later wear jackets with sleeves about 3 inches too short and trousers of the same origin was beside the point. Whilst I am thinking of that scene some of the colour combinations probably needed a licence. Fair's fair, if I had been wearing blue surge and white the rest of the time then any colours would have been acceptable.

What about those marvellous red sit up and beg cycles with rod operated brakes, white segment to the rear mudguard and the obligatory reflector? They were of course not for the likes of ordinary tradesmen but perks of the job for chargehands, inspectors and foremen (an unusual name for a section manager I thought) all clad in white overalls, collar and tie, and a foremen usually wore a trilby instead of the familiar peaked cap worn by many on their tools.

The most common attire for the young men of the time was donkey jacket and jeans all anchored by 'Totector' steel toe-capped boots on sale from the Whitley rooms. For jeans quite a few attended that bespoke outfitters, Shirt King, at the corner of Meadow and Charlotte Street. For those with a taste for 4 inch turned-up jeans at the top of their boots, and occasionally a neckerchief and bracers, the striped cord cap, in either blue and black, or red and black, alternate stripes seemed to complete the image. The name for the cap stuck in my mind is the 'cheese cutter'. In the case of older family men the work clothes often comprised winceyette shirt and tie, ex demob suit or aged sports jacket with curling lapels to match the shirt collar and grey flannels. As many were cycle mounted, cycle clips and sensible 'Tuf' shoes or boots would complete the ensemble. What women could have resisted!

The saddle bag or ex army shoulder bag held the day's sandwiches and thermos flask (for those who preferred home brewed tea instead of the water from the amenity centres or workshop urns). Talking of which, I remember well a gentleman daily fuelling and lighting a fire under the huge tank urn at the corner of 12 Dock on the western end of the FAE (Fitters Afloat East) offices and store. This particular urn would always be ready for morning tea break and boasted about 6 brass taps from a semi circular manifold. I think there were others around the yard for those 'afloat'.

I must say I was impressed by the Amenity Centres; always warm in winter, with copious amounts of hot water and those wonderful huge round white hand-wash troughs with central 360 degree fountain controlled by the all round foot-operated valve. Also at the centre above the shower were the swivel soap containers. The luxury did not end there as the clothes drying rails had hot water pipes below them with sturdy mesh guards over; the perfect place to sit for the 9.30 tea break. These centres were vital to thaw out in winter especially if you were working in the dock or top sides on a ship alongside. I would often wear a couple of jumpers under my brown overalls because, great as they were, I found it difficult to work in a 'fear nought' with my 'orang u tan' arms.

The out muster from all gates was something to behold, in particular Unicorn



Gate, as you may recall, with cyclists up to 5 or 6 abreast and woe betide motorists who thought they had the right to pass some men eager to get home for lunch or intent on getting home to work in the garden before tea. Regrettably the convoy mode had distinct negatives in

icy weather. My memory still sees a pack of us going down at the corner of the turn to the Gosport Ferry from The Hard. It was almost as if nature was

playing '10 Cycle Bowling' with the pack reduced to a random mix of wheels, arms and legs sliding graciously to a halt. Though the vast majority of cyclists commuted from the Portsmouth suburbs I was well aware that a good number also cycled in from places such as Havant and Leigh Park.

More than a decade after leaving the yard I worked alongside someone, who in the sixties as a policeman, was often on traffic duty at the junction of Regent Street with Mile End Road and Sultan Road. He would hear the Dockyard Siren, continue his duty for a few minutes, then leave the middle of the road as he removed his white arm bands and stand aside whilst the 'two wheeled swarm' crossed the junction. He said there was no point in attempting traffic control and just watched the scene until the flow abated before retaking his position. Among all the cyclists as well as the odd car there were other forms of transport namely the moped, of which the 'Norman Nippy', 'Raleigh Runabout' and perhaps the most common of all the 'NSU Quickly' easily come to mind. Wait a moment; the Germans couldn't stop the Yard during WWII but later infiltrated our domain with the 'Quickly'. It all makes sense now: they must all have had hidden cameras!



Half way between the 4 and 2 wheels (motorised or leggerised) was the ubiquitous Reliant and other 3 wheel bubble cars of the time, even the Berkley! Car-wise not many appeared as commuting machines; that scene was dominated by pedigree racing stock like the Austin A30, A40, Ford Anglia 100E, Standard 8 & 10; whereas management would float by in carriages of the Gods such as the new Riley 1500 - almost unthinkable.

There were other breeds of commuter such as the 'Mods' complete with ex-US Army Parkas (don't forget the fur lined collar) mounted on the Vespa GS or Lambretta GT200 with more lights and aerials than most HM ships had! As for the 'Rockers' with studded jackets and looking pretty hard, they had a Triumph, Norton, BSA, or any mix of the 3 - called 'Tritons' or 'Tribsas'. Many dockyard hours and alloy would have been spent making engine plates for motorcycles or getting the original engine plates chromium plated, petrol tanks stove enamelled etc. Well no..... not me.....I was just assuming that this sort of thing happened!

Transport for goods rather than people inside the yard, by contrast, was for many of us afloat, the Lister Truck. That strange flat bed motorised trailer in which a single cylinder (I think) Lister diesel was mounted above the front single driven wheel and the driver, open to the elements, operated a sturdy set of looped handlebars to steer the device, engine and all! Alan was our Lister man at Fitters Afloat East and with black oil skin and matching hat would come out in all weathers on many fetch and carry missions.

On the larger side of transiting items to and from the ships was the trusty RN lorry or the diesel locomotive. I am not sure if there were 2 or more of these

fine green machines but their workshop lay behind No 1 Electrical Shop, complete with drive-over pit and hoist.

It is interesting to note that some basic services and materials in similar ship yard environments today require documented booking systems or computerised paper work. Back then the materials for much of your work was obtainable by walking into an SNSO (Senior Naval Stores Officer, I think it stood for) demand store and walking out with everything you needed - by just signing the counter book with your yard number and adding the ships name. As for tools, a similar process was available by going to your respective section tool store and doing the same, except that the larger items had to be returned. The big dockside cranes were available on demand. I was able to stand between the tracks a few yards in front of the cab and wait until the driver saw your raised arm. He would open the window and advise if you were next or how many lifts there were in front of you adding an approximate time to get to yours. Very simple, and I cannot recall arguments over position or status, though they may have occurred - perhaps even with the punctuation of ancient Anglo Saxon for emphasis.

For those wishing to have a sit down lunch or tea break the dockyard canteen had just about all you wanted and most of them (Murray's Lane and 9 Dock spring to mind) appeared always to be staffed by older ladies which in hindsight (wages or image aside) may have been deliberate, seeing as a mother or even mother-in-law persona was necessary to deal with the demands of some folk that in a 'nothing is good enough' frame of mind needed some basic response communication. For us young men the attending lady would usually turn on a smile. In some way the canteen almost represented the local pub where regulars or there accompanied visitors would make up the clientele. I retain my memory of walking into Murray's Lane canteen for the first time one day and receiving a number of 'what do you want' looks, at least that was my perception and I never returned.

For me 9 Dock was my 'local,' fairly central as it was to the larger Docks that often held my place of work. Most of the canteen fayre would not pass muster these days as healthy eating, but who would refuse crusty filled rolls, pies, sausage rolls, cream or jam doughnuts especially in cold weather? Perhaps I am a little too harsh as a couple of the filled rolls had some salad filling. Anyway, as far as I am concerned the flavour and consistency of dockyard doughnuts from that time has not been surpassed since. What, you didn't eat them?! Vital Dockyard history has passed you by!

As for cigarettes my mind fails me as to whether the canteens sold these but, if not, then certainly the kiosks coming off the Gosport Ferry, outside the Unicorn Gate and umpteen tobacconists beyond the gates certainly did, as well as sweets and Fisherman's Friend. The favourite rolling tobaccos were Old Holborn, Ringers A1, Golden Virginia and Sun Valley. As for 'tailor made', the older men mostly stuck to Woodbines or Weights and if 'the note' was paying well, Players Navy Cut or Senior Service would be seen. For the sake of unadulterated luxury I would procure Capstan Full Strength, Phillip Morris or even Peter Stuyvesant on pay day. To further indulge the high life, special excursions to the tobacconist on The Hard were made to buy Balkan Sobranie

Black Russian! However the new Players No. 6 was the mainstay of the young man's smoke or, on reduced funds just short of pay day, No.10 (about the thickness of a pregnant pipe cleaner) would make an appearance. Yes, I admit to buying 5 Players Weights for about 10½d in their own flip top pack before the magic day.

A few smoked pipes including myself for a while, sucking on a 'Falcon', but too many days spent 'top sides' meant the wind burned the tobacco faster than I could enjoy it and St Bruno was far from cheap at more than 6 shillings an ounce. The expense returned me to roll ups at (5 shillings and a halfpenny an ounce), which had a draw back sometimes. It was not really good for flavour when attempting to roll one after you had your hands in diesel or FFO. For some aficionados with 'connections' the illegal 'Blue Liner' (sailors ration) would find there way into some pockets. It humoured me to watch those who smoked them ensuring the blue line remained at the bottom of the cigarette and covered it with the palm of their hand in and out of their mouth as they smoked it. You never knew who was watching!

Now I come to think of it the NAAFI (No Ambition and.....something about, All Interest, I think it stood for) sold fags, sorry cigarettes, at Excellent Steps. There was the 'café' on the sea wall, normally the sailors reserve and the small general store behind it across the road where my encounter with customer service always felt something like, "yeah what do want"! I don't think 'Dockies' were supposed to use it. One thing is for sure – that when the ship I was working on was moved from the dock to an outer wall or basin, this location would sometimes get a visit.

On the subject of ship movements, a summer opening of D Lock for a carrier was always well attended: my reason was to see what fish were caught as I waited for the brow and services to be reconnected. When the drain down was near completion, the piscatorial movements became clear. Very often a shoal of mackerel would provide tea for a few and large bass were not uncommon. My own hard-drive still holds the image of a tall Indian chap (one of the dockside party) clinging to a bass that was more than enough for a large family. On some occasions even cuttle fish would find there way in and very often good fish were lost to the pumps.

General working conditions for most trades afloat could at times be very trying to say the least. Bilges were often awash with a mix of salt water, fresh water diesel or FFO (Furnace Fuel Oil) plus other ingredients, on occasions of human origin. But for the most part ships staff did their best to ensure things were reasonable prior to coming into Dockyard hands. Systems would be properly decommissioned and drained and thus a general feeling of safety for most work activity prevailed. By going to the on board Engineers Office and asking for assistance to find a particular device or valve I would always receive help because for me, as a young apprentice, the difference in class of ship always had you wondering or trying to remember from last time you worked on a sister ship. Extra payments were usually available for the conditions in which you sometimes worked but it was often a mystery to me how some comparatively clean ships and work would add large dirty (obnoxious

conditions) or danger money payments to your wage while the virtual squaller of others would pay only pennies or nil.

To see just exactly what allowances had been paid on the morning of pay day you would arrive to see 2 clock cards in your slot. The extra one was your last weeks made up with overtime and the allowances penned in red. The bottom total would be the pay packet amount which I think was paid out by your Recorder at the lunch time out muster in exchange for the extra clock card. The return of the clock card to the recorder was the receipt by you of your payment; simple sound stuff. A brown, perforated, small envelope bearing your name and yard number would be stapled through the notes inside to retain them, act as a disturbance proof in the event of payment query and also retained the loose change. Despite being employed for not much short of 50 years now I would still prefer to be paid in currency. Electronic bank transfers have never really cut it for me.

On the one occasion I did have a pay query, I made my way to the pay distribution office near the end of 15 Dock and walked through a convoluted porch entry to have my problem sorted. On exiting, I saw the uniformed gentleman with 45 calibre revolver in the hidden side of the entrance! There was a lot of cash moving in those days.

I mentioned the Recorder. These chaps afloat had a very unenviable task to catch some of us between ship, section tool store or SNSO store, in order to take our job bookings. All entries would be pencilled, tallied, and committed to ink in your presence in their thick steel spined books - at least that is how I remember my Recorders' habits. For those Recorders in workshops things must have been a good bit easier.

From training centre to reality, a number of brand new skills had to be learnt - one of which was how to interpret the work content of the Job Price Contract (JPC) job card or later the DIBS version. (My apologies to those of you still in JPC mourning). Abbreviations were about 90% of the written hieroglyphics such as pp for pump, vv for valve, iwo for 'in way of', rem for 'remove', rcirc for 'recirculating' and so on. I had a second look at my first job card and wondered for a moment where the English version was, before working my way steadily through it to solve the puzzle.

Another skill which defeated a few, even after 3 or 4 different ships, was simply navigating below decks. For me HMS VICTORIOUS presented an illogical layout - used as I was to a few other carriers - and it took a little while to reliably find my way around. Dare I say the Yard rebuild of her in the late 50s early 60s was the reason? No? Okay then! One member of my entry would regularly get confused forward to aft or athwartships on a Frigate!!

There was even the skill of knowing your ships staff. On some vessels the feel was quite relaxed where on others the thought of a Dockyard man interfering with a Chief's domain, i.e. an engine room, had to be carefully approached with due regard for this status. You were, in reality, invading part of their home. Not surprising was the mix of Navy folk who disliked bloody 'Dockies'; and conversely those who readily accepted our arrival. Some senior tradesmen

had been sailors which gave an instant acceptance to crew members once they had opened a conversation in 'Jack Speak' as only an ex sailor can.

Whether my experiences and observations spark some memories of yours or not probably reflects on my lack of scope or the wrong period for you, for which I apologise but the following typical conversation must surely unite most of us having been on the receiving end of some folk's naivety who were 'outside the walls'.

"So you work in the Dockyard do you?"

"Yes that's right."

"You must know Fred!"

"Sorry, Fred who?"

"It' err.....I can't remember his second name, but I expect you know him, he has been in there for years!"

Without being unkind it used to be a little difficult to say much more.

*Copyright – Doug Seymour 2010*