

Transcript of Podcast 078: The Merchant Navy

{Intro:

Lesley: You sound like a gang of schoolboys

Gary: Basically we were like a bunch of kids, some of them public school}

{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a podcast looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Enby with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

Well, this is going to be an unusual episode in several ways, but the main one is the relative lack of personal updates and housekeeping. If you want to know what I've been up to this past month, now would be a great time to sign up to my monthly Newsletter, released on or around the first midweek day of the month. The deets for this are in the shownotes. Although be aware at the time of writing this pod, I hadn't got around to writing my newsletter. It, like everything else I'm involved with, has a flexible schedule.

The reason for the lack of housekeeping is that I wasn't sure how long this episode would get, in length, so to avoid it ending up being overly long, I figured I'd dedicate the whole episode to the subject in hand.

And what a subject. Now, I'm aware I don't talk about my background or my family much, save for the occasional regular subtweet to my mother. I'd best be on my most elegant behaviour this episode though because I think she might actually end up listening in. Indeed, as you'll have already heard, she appears on it, though for the most part only in passing.

But anyway. A couple of years after I was born, my mother re-married. And Gary, the chap she married, had an interesting job - he was a refrigeration engineer in the Merchant Navy. While he's long since left that role (he had some twenty-five years since doing the same role for a large supermarket chain specialising in frozen foods), this was how I first knew him, and thus may have been a childhood influence on my travels.

Just for the record, I never lived with him, though they only lived a couple of miles down the road. That's something you'd've had to have asked my grandmother about, and is beyond the scope of this pod.

But it occurred to me, after I'd done a few of my podcasts, that it would make an interesting episode - it's travel-related, it's a historic snapshot of a life that's very different now, and above all, it's not something I think many of you would necessarily know about. I certainly didn't know a lot about it growing up, and as you'll hear, there's probably some reasons for that. So a couple of years ago I went to visit, took my laptop and microphone, and set about interviewing him all about his life and his adventures. The whole thing was 2hrs 11 minutes, and that's mainly why it's taken so long to get this episode out into the wild - transcribing it was a whole job in itself.

Be aware too, Gary has a strong accent and a slightly fluid way of speaking. This did not help the transcription.

{section separation jingle}

But where to start? It makes sense I guess to start at the very beginning - what made him go to sea, and how did he find that initial voyage.

{Gary: When I first went to sea, like, the only reason I went to sea was I was trained as a refrigeration engineer. And one of the engineers I worked with when I was learning my trade, he'd actually been at sea himself back in the 1950s. And I thought 'this sounds this sounds good this'.

Me: He was in the Merchant Navy as well?

Gary: Yeah. Well, Merchant Navy was yeah, it says because you're not, you've gotta remember the merchant navy was so different from the Royal Navy, Royal Navy is military. Yeah. So it's very strict whereas the merchant navy. Like you have to obviously, you're gonna be sensible this that and the other. You also follow a captain as well, the chief engineer, you take orders, but it's not so regimented. So as you did just turn up for your work, that was it. Yeah. And I thought it sounds okay this, and you got your own cabin. I mean, there was early ships like the cabin and the washbasin in your cabin. That was it. The crew they never gave that. Yeah.}

He also seems to have fitted in quite well on that first trip, though it definitely helps to have good colleagues.

{Gary: Yeah it's funny eventually because the chief refrigeration engineer, a fella from Merseyside, cracking bloke he was, really really put you at your ease because you're a new boy yeah, you're new at sea you're a first tripper, you know your virginal, every aspect of this situation. So it was great. he looked after you really good nice bloke and he had medals on his uniform. In fact it was one of those occasions where someone told me an aside you know that he was on one particular vessel because most of these guys had all been in the war in the war. So it was this engineer, engineering officer I say he was a second or maybe a chief but he had more medals than the captain and the captain wasn't evidentially, this was the story I heard, very impressed like this lower ranking officer had more medals than him so god knows what he'd been involved in but like this guy this guy from Merseyside, the chief refrigeration officer he had medals, I was quite impressed. I saw them. He was telling me says it used to be great here during the war because they were all neutral, or on our side he says, being in Argentina he says. you definitely see a body floating down the river past the ship. Yeah. Because that's like out out like Wild West Country as you say. Everybody has guns. It was funny as well, it was comical what he said. It was interesting. It was it was good. good time good time to be at sea like}

We'll talk about the hierarchy of the ship more later, but first I wanted him to tell me a little in his own words about what the Merchant Navy actually did; it's different than the Royal Navy but I wanted to know more about how and what.

{Gary: What it was the merchant navy basically like, the Royal Navy, except that it doesn't go to war. It doesn't. It's trade. Basically, you've all over the world, wherever it is. You're taking stuff out from this country or Europe and take out the other side of the world when it can't produce it themselves. What they can produce for themselves, we bring bring back, like for example when you take out say like, machine parts, tractors, all the stuff Britain to Europe were, but not anymore, it's all Chinese now, famous for building, even magazines, books, the books and stuff, any general cargo. The particular ship I was on, which is a reefer ship, which means refrigerated, that was a slang term for refrigerated ship and we had a big fleet. And you bring back, if you went to New Zealand you bring back lamb or dairy products because you had refrigerated holds

Me: How big was the ship, I mean how much could it hold, your ship?

Gary: Oh god, that particular one, the first one well that particular one was at 14,500 gross tonnage, because that tonnage is slightly different, from a ton, and you had to convert into metric units now. But those were there was the right ships were built in 1960, very old, quite old, you see}

His first trip with the Merchant Navy was not without incident, although he does claim no responsibility for diplomatic incidents.

{Gary: But that first, that first trip I went on, when I first went to sea like, that was that was down to Argentina. South America, basically. It was in the days when well, just after the British got kicked out of South America especially Argentina and like basically but we still have a lot of influence down there. We usually take down out I think, I think we've actually went out, no it took some general cargo I think from what I remember that's where the port we was registered, London. And we went down there, we went through the Panama what let me see now we didn't go through the Panama Canal because it was on the east coast of South America so we went to so we went across from North Atlantic to the south Atlantic. I hadn't been to the south Atlantic before the Falklands broke out, nothing to it, went to Buenos Aires yeah coz we stopped over in Brazil first that's where I lost my virginity. (laughter)

And we went to Uruguay, I don't know what we did in Uruguay. Well, I got a photograph of me in there. We done a Saturday afternoon. me and a couple of engineers are off duty, like, we've grabbed a taxi. We've done a

tour of the city, whereby the President in his palace, El Presidente in his palace in Uruguay Yeah. And machine gun posts on every corner, honestly.}

Already you can get the sense of where some of my adventurous streak and passion for lesser-visited destinations comes from. Everywhere is interesting. And certainly on his trips he visited places tourists generally didn't go, especially not back then, in the late 70s/early 80s. You'll hear later a couple more of his exploits to non-touristy destinations and slightly off-limit places.

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But I think it's important to provide a bit of background to the Merchant Navy. As Gary said, it's primarily a method of world trade. As you all know, the world is pretty large - in a straight line it's 18,640km (11,580 miles) from where I live to the New Zealand parliament building, which would take about 650 days to walk, assuming the pace I had on my Hike Across Great Britain, except that you can't because as you also know, the world is 71% water.

Water, specifically ocean water, has the dual advantage of being both flat and apolitical, so if you want to set up long-distance trading routes, the easiest way logistically is by sea. Think of it as being the naval equivalent of all those long trucks and lorries you see on the highways and motorways. And just like those lorries, operated by companies such as Norbert Dentressangle and Kuehne & Nagel, the ships were operated by companies like P&O, British India Steam Navigation, Federal Line, and many others. It wasn't one 'homogenous organisation' in that sense, but certainly there was little difference in actuality between them and they were all viewed as one 'bloc' from outside.

In the UK at least, it was officially defined in 1835 with the first register of seamen, but obviously trading vessels had been around a long time before that. Although known by that name for many years, it was mostly referred to in official circles as the 'Merchant Service'; the name 'Merchant Navy' being officially bestowed in 1928 by King George V to honour the role played by the Merchant Service in World War One.

The UK's Merchant Navy used to be a lot larger than it is now; in 2012 it carried 3% of the world's tonnage which, although still a considerable amount, is considerably lower than the 33% it carried in the pre-war period. We'll cover a little about one of the reasons why the Merchant Navy is much smaller than it was later on in this episode. Stats from the UK government in 2012 state the Merchant Navy covers over 1,500 ships with a Gross Tonnage of over 100; Gross Tonnage being a measure indicative of usable ship volume. Internet research suggests this equates to vessels with a lower length around 75 feet or 22m long. You heard Gary mention his first ship was considerably larger than that!

I had been trying to get this podcast episode out to coincide with Merchant Navy Day, which is celebrated every year in the UK on September 3rd. This day celebrates the role and service of the Merchant Navy, especially in times of war. The day itself was first observed in 2000, and (appears to) commemorates the sinking of the SS Athenia in 1939 - the first Merchant Navy ship lost in the Second World War. Sadly I'm 14 months late from my original intention, but the thought was there.

{section separation jingle}

Obviously one of the issues faced by ocean-going vessels will be the weather. I asked him if he'd ever had any bad experiences with storms, sea swell, and the like.

{Gary: Oh, God, we had some terrible weather. Once you but once you were clear of the coast, like slightly, clear of the uh, you're getting about a couple of days you're in the Atlantic and you're heading South, and the weather picks up and it starts getting tropical. Most of the time you're you're hot. Yeah. But of course these particular ships were air conditioned, which I was responsible for. So it was really comfortable. You could go into your cabins at 20 degrees. Oh, love this, cold this isn't it. Over 20 degrees and you're roasted. y'know, 20 degrees in your cabin when it's 80 outside. y'know Yeah, right. 80 Fahrenheit obviously, 20 degrees C obviously. It's a hell of a difference. And when you're in an engine room, cos you're wearing nothing in the engine room. you're only wearing your boiler-suit You're only in your underpants that says your boots obviously and socks and white boiler suit.

Me: Got to get hot in there?

Gary: Yeah, because you're sweating. It takes it out of you, it really did. Cos you got the heat of the engine of obviously the engine. And also all the machinery.

Lesley: What about that storm we hit?

Gary: Oh, that was a one. I can't remember what it was now

Lesley: It was in the Atlantic wasn't it?

Gary: No, I think it was off the the coast of, where was it, trying to think, off the coast to America or something? It'd be like central South America.

Lesley: Nearly every night we were up doing lifeboat drill

Gary: Oh, yeah, it was what was wedged ourselves into the bar in the bridge. The crew supplied us with sandwiches and stuff so you can't really cook a proper meal to sit down and eat Yeah. Because what you normally do in rough weather, they get the tablecloths in the saloon and soak them down so they're wet so things adhered and they had little sides that you'd bring up fixing the place so your soup wouldn't land in your lap while you were eating. But if the weather got too bad it was too dangerous to make anything y'know, boiling and cooking anything up was too dangerous. But they'd supply us with some food to eat. we was all sat in a bar wedged in with life jackets around us. We were okay. Plenty of drink. That wasn't too bad, plenty of beer, made the best of it.}

Another storm he hit was in a less expected place, on a run across the Mediterranean to Israel.

{Gary: You were saying about bad weather as I say we was, on that meddy run on to Israel, and we run into a storm, it come out of nowhere. Was funny coz we thought oh Mediterranean, it'll be a doddle cruises, great. You saw the storm grow up and I'd been sitting in my cabin. Next thing I'm on the other side of the cabin. chair and all just thrown coz the ship had gone 45 degrees. You're very fortunate in some ships. Sometimes they don't come back. Well actually we did, but it took a while. there was bloody uproar, the place was in bedlam oh and I hear this shout from next door because it was in the afternoon. And the third officer. He worked about 8 in the morning to, what, midday, he was turned in coz he had to go on at 8 o'clock at night. Well I had to do that on my second trip well my first two trips at sea I had to do that like myself, it was 8am up to midday that you went on then 8 o'clock to midnight. Of course at midnight, you going straight to the bar. You didn't go to bed because you'd be with the like the third engineer, fourth engineer and myself the refrigeration engineer, and we've all be in the bar giving it this.

Lesley: It does explain a lot, you know

Gary: You get to two o'clock and you're up again. So anyway, oh, I heard this shout, this scream from next door. the third mate had been thrown out of his bunk. He'd been hurled out I said are you alright he says yeah, I got thrown out because had it swung back it took him out. And it was like an engine room bench, the engine room, the most stablest part of the ship. It's the bottom if you like and this bench had been thrown over. It tipped up. Absolutely place was in chaos.}

We'll be talking more about alcohol later. But you might well ask the obvious question: what about seasickness? Was that a problem on board ship?

{Gary: When I first went to sea, yeah, I was seasick but once I got over the initial y'know I got used to it y'know, like you're balancing and like like you you're okay because we've been ashore so long as we had, we had to get acclimatised, it was unbelievable, it was not just me it was everybody, virtually the entire ship, but that's what used to happen y'see}

I've already spoken on previous pods about my lack of seasickness. But that said, I've never been on a large ship in the open ocean; the nearest I've got was on a glorified speedboat going to St Kilda in a Force 5 gale, which was, not gonna lie, it was bracing for sure, but it's definitely not the same as crossing the entire ocean to the Americas or Oceania.

It's one of the many reasons I've not considered visiting Antarctica - I've heard too many tales of the roughness of the passage over there. And while it's tempting to hitch a lift on ocean-going yachts to island-hop

the South Pacific (I met a few people in Vanuatu who had done exactly that), as it'd be the only realistic way to visit some of them, I have to admit it's not something that's going to be on my bucket list.

That I can't swim probably doesn't really matter; if you're gonna go, you're gonna go.

{section separation jingle}

It wasn't just weather that caused problems on board though. Sometimes other technical problems occurred on board that would need fixing, and this could be anything from a minor leak to something just a bit more major.

What this meant is that engineers like Gary always had to be prepared for action at a moment's notice. And this meant being prepared.

{Me: so it was very much you just fixed what you could how you could}

Gary: yeah there were like shipwrights, yeah they were all proper seamen, they knew their job yeah because my capacity was a specialist job like like the radio officers would be, or the electricians

Lesley: (interjection) you carried a lot of stuff didn't you.?

Gary: yeah we carried a lot yeah yeah apart from that also you had to carry all your spares, so you carried everything around with you we carried bags of cement y'know for fixing holes in pipes stuff like that you put a box around and fill it up with cement for pipe weight which happened to me on one occasion}

Sometimes it would take more than a bag of cement to fix a hole.

{Gary: On one occasion one of the dockers, we had tractors we were taking out to New Zealand. One of the dockers dropped the bloody tractor into the ships hold, because it was I was working in the engine room and I heard this bloody great crash boom What the hell and it was because they were so bloody useless. At that time, over there that that is they just dropped it, they hadn't swung it properly.

So it had to be repaired, the deck had to be repaired because you're when you're on different levels. You go down what you got, yeah, yeah, your upper deck, lower deck lower, what do you call it, all up decks (?) or between decks. And then the hold, the main hold so you can carry at different temperatures and different products. And he dropped his tractor anyway. And as I say, it had to be repaired

Me: The decks had to be repaired and the tractor had to be repaired.?

Gary: Yeah. He had to take the hatch out to get it repaired. Which is, was was was wasn't easy. at all it would the decks if you open them all up and close with hydraulics that's what it was, that's how you open them up. course other ships have different methods of working.}

Sadly, sometimes there's nothing you can do. Obviously the dangers of shipping are well-known, from weather to warfare, bad navigation to on-board catastrophe, and while Gary had never experienced shipwreck, he has seen at first hand the terror of the unexpected disasters that can befall naval vehicles.

{Gary: when we went to Uruguay the sister ship was actually alongside in Uruguay which is like this particular vessel. So what normally happens when a when a ship goes it's built. They normally would built two normally, exactly the same. That's why it's called the sister ship. There's slight differences obviously bound to be. But basically the same. This was a sister ship the ship was alongside and what it had done it had been in the - because this was up the River Plate which was another interesting place in the Second World War. So it was up the river plate so we're lost sight of this. So we got in there, what they'd done one night this particular ship was travelling the River Plate it collided with a gas carrier, and evidently because one of the engineers was telling me because his mate was on board had been on board if everybody on that particular ship because they've been out there worked for Holder Brothers. That that that particular shopping company. They'd all have. They knew someone on it would have been on the ship and the ship went up. This blew up because what happened with the gas they reckon it got sucked in by the ships air-conditioning system that ignited

Me: in an instant presumably.?

Gary: It was totally instant. They reckon they found one body of one one person that was about it. Everybody was vaporised so you can imagine what the ship looked like yeah, it was, I'd never seen it. Well, it was my first trip anyway. There's just a Hulk nothing nothing you can see the shape obviously the combination whatever it is survive but absolutely Yep. As you can imagine, something been through a massive fire, so it was quite sobering

Me: I can imagine!

Gary: honestly,

Me: you said it was your first trip you saw that.?

Gary: I saw that yeah, first trip. Thing is I found out later that gas carriers they normally get around a coast of any country especially in the UK, and they're like small small vessels and they carry propane, propane liquid liquid petroleum gas, LPG, and there's all sorts of safety (reasons?) that go on them, but on this particular unfortunate occasion they collided in the River Plate, so that was it.}

It was just one of the dangers of the job, and everyone knew it, it was just something you accepted as being a risk. You are a long way from the nearest hospital, especially in the early 80s, so if something went wrong you had to rely on the ships medics and hope that it wasn't too serious. As far as I'm aware, no-one died on board any of the ships Gary served on, though it wasn't a question that occurred to me to ask when I was doing the interview.

{section separation jingle}

One of the important aspects of life on board a Merchant Navy ship is the job itself, and the work environment. But before we went into that, it's first useful to give an indication of the size of the ship.

{Lesley: Wasn't there about 40 people on the ship}

Gary: The average about that, yeah that's all there'll be so like y'know not like the Navy the Royal Navy there can be hundreds you know on a little vessel not even the size of one [lever], ones like I was on, because ones you see not particularly big yeah but big enough yeah. So if it's raining in an afternoon you probably won't see anybody because people would be turned in or to be working somewhere else. That's, you'd only see the people who was on duty crew was you see, you could be on nice ship. I mean, they go on about these cruise liners be a car(?) You're packed in! what I've seen of those, y'know looks terrible . With our ships I worked on you know, it's great, you didn't see anybody.}

Gary was a refrigeration engineer; this is someone who's job is to make sure the cold storage systems work. Since the ships he served on were designed to transport goods that needed to be kept at cold temperatures - almost exclusively food - this meant his role was incredibly important. There were several other refrigeration engineers on board, and they worked shifts, which he talked about at length.

{Gary: if you're on day work coz as I say we didn't have any refrigerated cargo on board, you just worked, the two refrigeration engineers, the electricians would all be on day work, with engineers, mates, they'd be on shifts, obviously. The electricians were always actually on day work, because the nature of their job. But we started carrying refrigerated cargo, us fridge engineers had to be on watch as it were, someone on duty to see if it goes wrong all the time. However, having said that, there was a dead watch between 12 and four.}

Me: Overnight.?

Gary: Yeah. Where it was, well, there was no refrigeration unit because to do a proper shift 24 hours you go through at least three people.

Me: Yeah, I was thinking that

Gary: that's what it is, you carried the three engineers and then you carried three junior engineers who've done done make me a cup of tea sort of thing

Me: You have a senior engineer and a junior engineer on at the same time.?

Gary: That's it, yeh.

Me: So you basically partnered with the same person for the whole trip

Gary: Oh, yeah, that's right. That's quite right. But you knew everybody else anyway. So I used to work when I was a junior eight to 12. Yeah. Yeah. Morning. Night. And this, that senior was four to eight as it were, yeah, twice, so it's four hours off four hours on. So, that 12 to 4 shift, well what you did, because we've got alarm systems on board, not in your cabin like,. And in later ships there was alarms in your cabin as well.

Me: So effectively you were still on call?

Gary: Yes, basically you were on call. The alarm would call you or the engine room crew would call you, who was on duty if the alarm went off in the engine room. And they'd phone you up because you'd have a phone in your cabin. On these later ships, not the first two I sailed on. So basically, that's how it worked out, when you weren't carrying cargo, you were on day work like the electricians.}

This also had practical follow-on considerations, including mealtimes.

{Me: so you all eat together at the same time then presumably?}

Gary: Well, if you're keeping watch, you're keeping shift y'see

Me: You're all on the same shift ?

Gary: well you move around like depends on your take over someone, so they can get a meal, that sort of thing, so it depends on where your shifts fell, where your watches fell,

Lesley: {interjection, can't make it out} the crew would have, they met on a different deck

Gary: Oh the crew had a mess room, crew eat in a mess room. And we had a saloon where we was waited on because you have a cabin Stewards as well bedroom stewards as they call them. White jackets as well, and we had to wear uniform, eating for meals, or any official functions we had to wear uniforms, whereas crew obviously weren't, there was a separation you see? I'll say our accommodation is better than theirs, obviously. But you still, we all work together. Yeah, yeah. We worked it out and work together.}

The first job I had in the energy industry, where I stayed for 20 years, was a rotating shift pattern, but in an office environment where we were working on our own, and where we could easily swap our shifts with someone else. I tended to prefer the nightshifts, which were I worked was 10pm to 8am; the person on the rota pattern immediately before me preferred the 8am-3pm morning shifts so it became standard for us to swap. It is a very different way of working though, to know you don't really have a set routine and to know you could be on call at any moment if there was sickness or unexpected holiday - in my job there were only seven of us.

But going back to his role, Gary touched on something else that was an important aspect of ship life. We've heard him mention in passing earlier about the crew and the officers and some of the roles on board, but of course despite it not being a military vessel, it's still an enclosed space where people are going to have to both work and live alongside each other in a similar way, and if only to maintain a peaceful and efficient working environment, there's going to need to be some kind of demarcation and structure. This isn't an office space where people can go home and rant, or call in sick without repercussions, or even avoid people they've conflicted with. In addition, although there's obviously a mindset shift between work life and non-work life, there's much less of a work-life balance split, as you're essentially 'living at work' - similar to the likes of oil-rig workers but also in a sense like many residential care workers do.

This had repercussions for the layout of the ship too, as it meant certain parts on board were purely reserved for certain roles or ranks.

{Gary: I'd say you'd worked in shifts if you had cargo on board if you had general cargo as for me actually refrigeration engineer we had this like it was because you will combination and in the corridor in the companion way if you like on the starboard side of the ship that was where I slept, engineers and junior deck officer, next deck up near to the bridge you had the slightly senior deck officers, that's the captain and the chief

engineer. And what was what once the refrigeration engineer chief and the Junior refrigeration engineer their cabins were sort of opposite each other. So just off off the off the main accommodation as it were on this particular vessel. And there was a separate door for the rest of the ship. The idea being like once the cargo was on board, the refrigeration is part of cargo, so it's keeping the door shut. So it was like demarcation. Like there's a lot of that going on, it was like living in ranks, you see. See when other people I become refrigeration, senior refrigeration engineer, I've got two bars two gold bars on my shoulder and of course so did the third engineer had two gold bars and the second mate two gold bars all the ones like the Fourth engineer would be one gold bar junior engineer, electrician, one bar senior electrician two bars. And then if we increase engineers, and the mates increase perceptively second engineer three bars mate three bars, Captain four chief engineer four that's as far as you've got. }

I asked him about other roles on the ship, and who else you needed in order to make it function.

{Gary: Sid was one he was an AB which means Able Seaman, when you get on in the crew like they do like qualifications as well, and EDF is it? elec- efficient you get efficient seamen then it goes AB, able seamen, which was what you had in the navy anyway, which is slightly higher up, because you have more skills, because even like there's a lot of skills required on seamanship, even though you haven't got any sails, but you still got to know how to - you had to put together a load of Canvas and stuff like that and so splice ropes and stuff like that. And get it rigged up and put your masts in and stuff like that. Get a gangway up, and whatever put it out, make sure the lines are taut, for the tugs will take you out in the long side and be ready for you. If a storm blows up if you're in a storm port (like Tela) it'd be ready to take the ship out at a moment's notice. Cos if a storm blew up, you'd be wrecked. Because Tela's in Central America, and that particular place is where it could happen. So it's a lot of skills. And then of course you become a boson and you're in charge of everybody.

A Bosun is a boatswain who's in charge of the deck crew, right, and you had the donkeyman who's like in charge the engine room crew like greasers, in the old days they would have been stokers, but of course these are motor ships they weren't steam ships, but I did work on steamship once when I first went to sea, on a steam turbine makit(?) ship, beautiful, all brass, what you see on old telly, old films stuff like that.

And then of course they had an electrician. he was a green, he had a Green bar whereas the officer had a pale blue and the purser who was in charge of catering he was double barred as well. Obviously, he had a bloody good cabin. like The captain because he was he was he was responsible for the paperwork basically, for the victualler, for the personnel on board

Me: he was responsible for the money as well wasn't he?

Gary: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. That's why we used to call the chief thief. I'm not joking. But if you had a good Chief on board I think I should say purser on board, they don't like being called chief stewards the like being called pursers coz that's basically what they were you're in charge of the purse. They doled out money for when we was in port foreign currency we'd need doled out there they'd make sure you got your wages, your correspondence, all that sort of domestic issues they were in charge of the domestics on board the ship whereas the rest of us had other specialist jobs. That's it,

Me: you run the ship and he runs the crew

Gary: well, I run the refrigeration plant because it was a refrigerated ship. I mean you had other vessels with general cargo, they might have a locker that may carry some refrigerated food, as well as also the suit (?) for the galley. And that would be run by the engineers because they engineers especially as opposed to just for that job. Because it's important if you lose the cargo the ship's lost all it's money, so the idea was you took the general cargo out. And that would pay for that particular trip. And what you've come back with was all profit pure profit. And if you got enough profit, You'd have enough to build another ship. that's how you get your fleets built. as I say at that time p&O general cargo division it was the biggest one in the world. Yeah, it really was.

So as I say if you had a decent purser on board, y'know One who wasn't like a skinflint. One who would look at how much money I've saved for the company', miser, then you had, your ship was a good eater. y'know If you had a decent cook, they were good ships, those. Good if you had a decent purser you were laughing. I've sailed with quite a few that who weren't.}

Sometimes there were clashes with the people on board, as you might expect given being in an enclosed space for so long surrounded by the same people, and especially, as we'll hear later, alcohol was the easiest way of 'switching off' from work mode. Gary was party to one incident on the first trip he did.

{Gary: Oh my gosh there was some tough bosuns. Jesus!

Me: I suppose you have to be in that job, don't you?

Gary: Especially on the Fyffe ships. Talk about tough was that that was not bloody in it. I saw an AB, he was from Stornoway

Me: oof!

Gary: and the bosun was from Stornoway as well

Me: Rough place, as in weather wise anyway

*Gary: oh weather-wise yeh. These two were both from Stornoway, and they was always getting into fights. We went to see the bosun one morning and said where's your teeth? He had one of this teeth knocked out by this AB. He literally was built like the Hulk, literally he was. Lovely bloke though. I got on great with him y'know as you do, you had to basically, he was a bully, he took no notice of the officers. There was a party in the crew bar one of the nights on the Fyffe ship, and they made this bloody big punch and his bloody big tureen. And we all got drunk. y'know And then next minute someone stumbled, and the thing was, one Galley crew, stewards if you like worked in the... like galley boy if you like knocked it, absolutely knocked onto this bosun's AB's foot, and he says did you just knock that on my foot? he said well yeah. *boof*! he knocked him out with his head! cor blimey, streaming! I thought, what have I joined? }*

Finally there was also a slight rivalry between the Merchant Navy and the military. Gary told me this incident while going through the Panama Canal.

{Gary: A Second Mate was telling me, we were going through the Panama Canal and in the Panama Canal you have to have their own pilots take you through and because it was a military base there when I first went through there was all military so when you see the the military personnel out of a weekend at their speedboats, enjoying the weather was I was it's tropical. And on this particular trip and this particular captain, the pilot comes on board, American baseball cap bag with him, gets on board he says captain Smith officer, "Smythe". he says "shit, shite it's all the same to me." And the second mate was there, yeah, he had to go on the bridge. because he couldn't stop laughing. Can you imagine the look on the captain's face. And next thing you know he says right, you know what you're doing don'tcha, picks a radio up switches it on and starts eating, starts having a snack. And he couldn't do a thing about it because he, the pilot, was actually he in charge of the ship, this pilot. I think in an emergency the captain could take over if anything really dire dire happened. [Indistinct bit] I don't care who you are. This is the second mate. It's supposed to be so bloody funny he says he had to turn away because of laughing.}

From a personal preference point of view, I, famously, don't really get along with authority figures. As you surely already know. So the idea of not only working in an environment where the chain of command by necessity has to be quite rigid - because a ship in the ocean is no place for dissent or questioning command in the moment - but also being stuck around those same people all day and night, would absolutely not be anywhere on my radar. I'd've been laid off at the first port. It's just not something I don't think I could even do grudgingly.

It's also why I never applied for Big Brother, despite every one of my friends saying it'd make good television if I did. Every. Single. One. I value my mental health more than that, sorry.

{section separation jingle}

Obviously food was an important aspect of daily life. After all, when you're feeling peckish on a huge vessel in the middle of the ocean, you can't just wander off to the nearest Tesco Express or 7/11. In fact meals tended to be more formal, get-togethers in the canteen, with a limited menu, albeit more varied than you might expect.

{Gary: you got all your meals are provided obviously coz you ate-

Me: you had a cook presumably?

Gary: Oh yeah there was two cooks. Chief cook and and sort of like the second cook was normally classed as, we used to call him the Baker, the galley boy to learn a trade as well. well yeah sorta like a kitchen help, that sort of thing. And they qualified all that, all had to go to catering college so mostly came from Merseyside, catering college, even engineers went to college at Merseyside, Riversdale I think it's Riversdale, out there in Sefton, out that way. There were I dunno if it's still going, and so anyway you get your breakfast where it was lunch, dinner and supper if you want it that sort of thing.

Me: so what sort of food was it?

Gary: oh god you can have - your breakfast was normally full English breakfast or you put on a special one, Yeah, you got that fruit whatever cereal y'know all that sort of thing. Like three courses of it if you like, you're put on like that they made like poached eggs, so yeah poached egg breakfast like bacon, poached egg whatever like, and all the trimmings you know what it was or whatever on the menu that day and what they could provide. . o'course you gotta be, remember you gotta be {pause, sigh} your victualler, the chief steward, cos he carried the purse, your chief steward, like was over all the catering staff. So he had to work out how much food would do for that trip you see? Especially when you're on the way back back and they run it as tight as possible, y'see. Because they look good on their records y'see.}

So, you couldn't go overboard, so to speak, with your food allocation, but it certainly wasn't rationed down to the ounce. And we'll hear more about the flexibility around that later.

Obviously some foods spoil, although since he worked on refrigeration ships, that was less of an issue since there was cold storage Right There, which definitely would have helped matters. And of course they'd replenish in port anyway. One thing they did tend to lack though was fresh milk.

{Gary: Three Meals a Day and you had a little restroom where you can make yourself a cup with a cup of tea or coffee would have you and you had a little fridge stocked up with food you could make a supper with of an evening usually what's been on what's mainly been on that evening meal eat your dinner and there'll be a bit left over that's cold meats Alright, so sometimes we'll have some sausages sometimes a bit of cheese so we had milk in there, that's long life milk but once you get to something like the port somewhere especially with New Zealand. You took on fresh milk so you had fresh milk everyday so it's all the engineers all the, most of the officers would put an order in with a local milkman, you need to come down the ship, deliver our order, a crate of milk, and we'd have of a breaktime we'd have a pint of milk that was basically all cream, coz it's new Zealand

Me: it must have made a very big difference from the from the UHT

Gary: Oh God just a bit like although you got used to UHT but it was quite nice

Me: I've used it use it before, but it's...

Gary: we got used to it, you know}

As an aside, I used to use UHT milk a lot in my younger days, precisely because it lasted longer and I didn't use it that often - just the occasional bowl of cereal or milkshake. It was, I mean it was perfectly potable, but in the same way that store-brand cola is.

The food offered also depended on the company who owned the ship, the chef and staff who crewed it, and the itinerary and destination of the voyage. Gary here tells us what happened when one voyage he was on was crewed by Indians.

{Gary: As I said, you had a cook for the crew and a cook for the officers. And of course, they were turning curry out everyday. I had the best curries in my life every day for lunchtime. And it was the best one was a double curries ah that was absolutely superb. And you weren't ... they fed you anything you want. If you want second helpings. No problem. On that particular ship actually, which was Indian crewed, take the Mate a steak dinner. Cos every Sunday, you had a steak dinner. If you ate steaks, obviously. It was a steak was it was it was traditional. So he finished his steak dinner and he ordered another one! If you'd done it on a white-crewed

ship, it'd be, it'd be don't, you can't do that, what do you think you're doing?! ... The Indian crew treat you like kings. And there was no there was no problem. For example my steward on that particular ship he said 'why did you not come down for breakfast?', well I never had breakfast, I always had a lay in. he couldn't understand it. You must eat! on a white-crewed ship It was like greedy bastards. Honestly}

Sometimes though, it was not unknown for the officers to take matters into their own hands.

{Gary: So we came out of New Zealand, we were the first vessel evidently, we set up a trade around what's called the Pacific basin now. We're the first one that opened up a trade with China from New Zealand, and of course, it was supposed to be a secret and on board the ship at the time. And of course we heard it on the radio in New Zealand. It was common knowledge if you listened to the radio. So we load up all this stuff from New Zealand, to take to China, and Japan.

So we got to restock for New Zealand took Crayfish of things we'd load up the crayfish, lobsters that was for Japan, put it there for the embassies in Japan. Yes.

When we got to Japan ... we'd been raiding the cargo hadn't we, the crew been raiding the cargo. But all we took was the lobsters. They're emptying the ship and unloading the ship like and the second mate is on duty. he says this is scandalous! I could tell you stories about him, he was a nice bloke, very straight, he went to private school. Yeah. Very well spoken, good navigator, but very very straight, you understand? And he said this is scandalous, course basically, Japanese, Japanese superintendent, they're laughing, they just couldn't believe it as well. where's all the lobsters? They've all gone! We had lobster dinners in our cabin.

Lesley: We had a little fridge in our cabin.

Gary: Yeah, we were we had a fridge so we could it was great in that respect. I mean the senior officers like the captain the chief engineer had their own fridges as well. I think that mates did as well. but it wasn't common for everybody. It'd been brought on from our previous trip you see, sometimes you'd bring a fridge on board for the ship. fortunately, we had AC in the vessels. The only ships were in DC. So basically you had to have a transformer so to convert the power, cos it was an older ship you see. So we were lucky we had a fridge. So Christ, you know I've got two lobsters, and she had a crayfish salad and we was talking to the radio officer he was having a drink with us before we went down to dinner. I says it's alright for some, what I should have done is invite him to stay really. Yeah. So that was it so and everybody knew what was going on. apart from this second mate because we know if you say if he finds out he'll tell the captain but the thing was, he was the only one who missed out. Some of the nights he's like "I see the crew are having lobster supper again", big booze up lobsters everywhere, all thawed, because what they were, were pre cooked and frozen, so you just took them out the freezer in the hold and ... this is theft, you know, it is breaking a law basically but the funny thing was though we've got to sea into New Zealand I think it was or somewhere after Japan and on the main menu comes up - ah crayfish hooray crayfish is nice and the chief engineer who happened to be a New Zealand as well says I had to come down for this he said y'know had to come on for this one so that was on the menu and the captain says 'yes, they've done very well haven't they', who the hell bought lobsters to eat onboard a ship, so the captain knew what the score was but he was the sort of guy was, he'd turn a blind eye yeah fair., knew the score, basically}

Obviously this was not common or expected practice, but since it happened so long ago, I'm sure no-one's going to press charges. But for clarification, I'm absolutely not endorsing this sort of thing.

It was funny, though.

{section separation jingle}

One of the important things to bear in mind about the job was the sheer length of the journeys involved. Bearing in mind Gary in particular did trips all the way from the UK to New Zealand, and I asked him how long that took.

{Gary: normally that New Zealand one you normally say about 14 days there get across the Atlantic for Europe and then you pass through the Panama Canal it was only like two weeks or so across the Pacific we didn't see anything empty might see the occasional shipping see lots of islands depends what you pulled into.

Me: would you stopped off anywhere on route to-

Gary: no, you stop off in Panama take on the bunkers Yeah. Which is fuel fresh water and maybe some supplies because you took all your food with you obviously and so basically you could recycle them you could be a good month at sea easy}

And for much of that time there was nothing to see except the horizon. The journey was like being on a motorway or interstate through Kansas.

{Gary: I was on that particular ship for about five years running down to New Zealand because In like a liner that liner liner roots basically not like a cruise liner, like you're on a train, goes from one city, like an inter-city if you like, that's what we did, as the old saying was once we've got out of port I remember the second officer, the second mate, turn around and say 'right', we was underway, out to sea, and he's say: right, put on the tramlines', that was a saying at sea, 'you got to put it on the tramlines'. Someone would always say 'oh you'd think you'd follow the empty beer cans'; by this time you just followed the empty beer cans. there was always a lot of beer drinking going on, amongst other things}

We'll definitely be talking about beer soon. But as for the journey, even once in port you might be there for a while.

{Gary: We was about a month in Auckland. Yeah, we were this month we are drawing barnacles on the ship like, it was that flipping long, like normally average about a week or so, maybe a couple of days}

It follow that the crew had to make their own entertainment whilst on board. Some of it was quite benign – remember though this was in the days before podcasts, before personal music systems even. That said, I'd imagine even today the internet access on board an ocean-going vessel somewhere around Kiribati might not quite be equipped with state-of-the-art broadband internet connectivity anyway.

{Gary: so you made your own entertainment in that respect. So because you carried videos with you, and films, and what you do is you get to port, change the films around, so we had our own projector screen and this that and the other. and the crew knew how to use it as well this that and the other, cos that was that was what your sole entertainment was at the time y'know, none of these floor shows like on a a cruise liner and all that sort of stuff. Yeah. Different bars and that but you had to like to do it all yourself, which is great. Plenty of books and stuff to read. Anyway, so it was okay I mean, I used to be turned in about half past nine of a night because you'd be working all day. And you're at sea and sea air is really good for you, it makes you really sleepy and you don't get you don't get bored of it, or the noise of the engine room.

Me: Because you get used to it, presumably?

Gary: Oh yeah, it rocks you to sleep. So long as you had decent weather as well. Old as well. So we'd usually grab a sandwich, you'd have some long life milk coz as I said we use this milk we use it carries long life. So then read a book and turn in. y'know that sort of thing. But it was okay. It was great.}

One thing to bear in mind was the state of the accommodation; given that you'd be spending an awful lot of time holed up in your cabin.

{Gary: I worked with a feller at Iceland. He was he was on a boat. he was like the third engineer But he had his own cabin and in his cabin had his own wash his own bathroom study at a study site. Like a day room bloody hell's teeth all we had was a bunk and a desk and a sink in a corner of the cargo ships. Course it got better later on with Lesley went to sea with us, we had our own bathroom, luxury! had your own bathroom shower like yeah, it was a luxury. Yeah, that was that's because they improved the accommodations, y'see a lot of those old ships they wasted a lot of space because they had like the decks and the sides so there wasn't a lot of space that could've been used, coz all we really do was went out there and sat down on a bench or whatever, and gaze out to sea at nothing. Yeah, so that's all that space was how they built them. }

However, for most other times, there was always the bar. Just like for food, the ships Gary was on had two bars, one for the crew and one for the officers, essentially. There was of course rivalry between the bars, which led to some funny incidents playing out. Here, Gary tells us about a darts match between the crew and the officers that both sides were determined to win by hook or by crook.

{Gary: You've got together on social nights as well. You know, for a darts match. There was a great rivalry in darts matches - the stories I could tell you about that! - used to be really good actually like every every once a week of a night, the crew would, the catering staff would cook up a load of pizzas, sandwiches the lot. And we'll all be in what would be their bar, because we had our own bars as well. They go to drink, and we'd take it in turns on the darts nights where we go to their bar, then they come to our bar, to play the match. And it was re-rent (?) to one chief engineer I'd set up with, he'd come from Newcastle and he was, he had been at sea a long time, a nice bloke.

It was it was so important to him to win this match for some reason ah god he couldn't care less about anything else, he just wants to win this darts match, and the Boson built this darts trophy, it looked like a spear! It was like that big. Yeah, it's supposed to represent a dart y'see, it was absolutely grotesque. Anyway, we eventually went out and bought a trophy from somewhere, in Liverpool or New Zealand or somewhere, we got a decent trophy like, a proper one. But anyway, this was this sort of temporary like he was overjoyed because it was all built by hand there's no machines on board, well probably in the engine room and we might have had a lathe or something, I don't think we even had a lathe actually.

Anyway one night the crew won the darts trophy because when you keep it in your bar you the winner keeps it in their bar during the week, so one night we won it they won, and the chief engineer's face is like thunder y'know, he was really, really annoyed. So I had to hand over the trophy to him. I said it gives me great pleasure to hand over this trophy and all the crew were laughing and the chief engineer's tearing his bloody hair out virtually. Because what he's done is he'd pulled my Junior, it was supposed to be two Fridge engineers, a senior refrigeration engineer and a junior refrigeration as it were. So he actually has pulled him off duty from his watch. Where he should have been working he pulled him off because he was such a great darts player on this occasion. So he said and the junior said sorry it's the chief. I said its okay, so no worries he says you don't care? I says I don't care as long as you're on watch I said you're you're playing darts and fortunately they won that night, the crew - the officers won that day so everyone was made up that day, buy him a drink, right}

Even when in port, or possibly especially when in port, the entertainment and the beer continued.

{Gary: The first thing you'd do when you got ashore as everybody would tell you is head to the nearest bar. Yeah. Once a bar got a good name for it, you'd go further afield. The crew would go to the nearest bar, we the officers would be a bit more.

Lesley: Was it Charleston we were all sitting in the bar, the tavern on the green.?

Gary: Oh god. Yeah, it was good

Lesley: The ship's supposed to be sailing in 10 minutes.

Gary: Somebody went another round of beer.

Lesley: They couldn't have gone because half the crew were there.

Gary: You couldn't have gone like cos half the crew were there. You can't sail unless you have a full crew. You gotta have a certain amount of crew aboard but um one person you can't sail without is the radio officer. Yeah. And obviously one of the radio officers was telling me he says at one point he was on one particular trip he said I've actually been offered money by the crew to stay ashore they don't wanna sail because they're having such a good time. he said I was tempted, it was a lot of money. Because crew, the crew got paid money paid good money. as long as they put the hours in, they didn't get leave like we did. Because the leave around there for an officer was like two on four off like a while. An average trip for me, would last about four months. So you get about two months off. that's how it works, that's the way round it works}

While it might sound like alcohol was the default option, you were of course in your workplace and you always had to be careful and stay responsible, especially as all the jobs on board were vital to the running of the ship - it absolutely couldn't be a place for slacking and not pulling your weight.

{Gary: And also, you used to get drunk, but the thing was, so long as you were able to work, that's all that matters. You didn't do it at sea. The thing is, no matter how flaming times, you know, at sea, but never on duty. If I used to wake up in the morning, I'm not proud of this, but it was the same for all of us. It used to be a rarity to wake up a morning and not to have a hangover. Because by midday, you're clear.

Me: yeah the sea air

Gary: Exactly. And also we were young, in your 20s. Couldn't do it now.

Me: what you were doing was so intense in a sense

Gary: it was so hot. Yeah. Your sleeves you went out? Yeah. But you had to take salt tablets. But I remember on one occasion I was still quite new it's still new ish as you were and it's, what happened to me light headed - course it was a lack of salt, so knocking back the salt}

Don't forget too, this was the 80s, and even in strong office culture, drinking on the job was, well, I mean, drinking actually on the job was frowned upon, but liquid lunches, early finishes to the pub, and even post-success 'celebrations' were all not just tolerated but actively encouraged. Industries well noted for this included journalism, politics, and many parts of finance but especially the traders and brokers who run the stock markets.

One assumes it's much more regulated now, but then as we'll hear later, it's a much smaller crewed operation now anyway.

{section separation jingle}

All this talk of downtime leads us on naturally to Shore Leave. Now, Shore Leave was an opportunity to let your hair down and have fun, without worrying about work the next day, and without having to worry about anything on-board ship.

{Gary: On one occasion there was a myself, third mate had his wife aboard at the time and three cadets. We hired a minibus in Auckland. We self rental for spend a weekend in New Zealand countryside. Went round the Coromandel Peninsula and places like that and fortunately the third mate asked the cook if he could supply us with any food. So he gave us a load of steak. Which broke every rule in the book in New Zealand because agriculture ministry of agriculture because they get foot and mouth over there, they're dead. Or would have been in them days.}

Once again, I'm not condoning breaking any local laws or customs.

Shore Leave though wasn't a simple case of arriving into dock and immediately de-boarding. Even in port there had to be a certain complement of people on-board ship, for security and maintenance purposes, so as Gary goes on to say, you weren't always guaranteed to get it, at least not immediately.

{Lesley: if you were on duty at the time, you couldn't leave the ship.

Gary: we would all come off duty off watch cos what we do, if you're in port you don't keep watching, we keep a watch in the engine room. And you keep a day aboard man for the for the bridge and also the crew, deck officers they take turns basically we always had to have someone on board but we didn't have to give a watch, in the engine room you did you know because they ran the generators if you're running on your power it normally it was down to the junior engineer as it were, the lowest of the low but your your day work did you still had to work day work. So once we'd all finished work, we're all steaming ashore straight to straight to the most popular bar in that port.}

The ship always has top priority, basically. It just meant in practice though you might have to wait your turn.

In addition, there was a certain amount of admin that needed doing, before shore leave was granted.

{Gary: Whenever you reached ports, your personal details had to be registered because so you obviously don't jump ship so so all the documents had to be verified. So wherever you made port the purser laid on the drinks and all the ashores, all the officials if you like from the dock came on board.}

Plus of course these are trade ships not cruise ships - they go where the money is, not necessarily where there are facilities. This means you'd visit quite a few places that were, shall we say, difficult. This meant Shore Leave itself wasn't always possible, or at least, if you could get off the ship it might only be to a handful of places. It

depended very much on the destination, and as you might imagine, some places were more restricted than others.

{Gary: If you went to Russia, China, all those communist countries? Yeah, you were restricted. Once we went to Russia, and obviously it was Communist at the time. And what you saying could you travel anywhere? Yeah, well, you couldn't but the only person who was allowed to go anywhere was the captain. Because they had a lot of respect. And we were there like so everybody basically ashore there was nothing to do there was a mission here a big mausoleum of a place and on the wall was five year plan.

You got ashore in China didn't you?

Lesley: They only let us go to the Seaman's Mission, we couldn't go anywhere else. I couldn't go out the dock gates.

Gary: but if you're in a Western country, well, a democratic country like England. Yep. You can go anywhere you like. We went to South Korea. Busan. And that was good, we got ashore there. didn't go to the British Seaman's Mission. Basically, you didn't go to Seaman's Missions full stop. Because it's too religious, you know, to decide you might as well have stayed on board.

Lesley: We went to the American Army Base

Gary: What we done was we went to the American army forces. And that was really cool. That was great. You could get anything in there, a really good steak meal, clothing, jackets and stuff. Yeah. Yeah. It's really good. The typical American, was set out right. Yeah. So of course, of course, cos we come in from China and South Korea, we was right up next to the, it was like a building by the side of ship, like a bunker, like a block basically shaped like a block. And on top of that there was a bloke with machine gun, they'd built a machine gun, it was focussed right on the bridge, just in case we would have been infiltrated by the Chinese And you see them all standing, dressed in full military kit and I thought that's pretty good inmit. And there was a curfew, you got to be back at your ship by twelve o'clock. In fact, the mate the mate had to go back that particular vessel was he says I couldn't get back, that's why I had to stay with this girl. Oh, yeah, right. Yeah, exactly. he had to say I put a pillow between us. Oh, yeah. Because she was obviously on a game. Yeah. An awful lot of that sort of thing went on.}

An awful lot of that sort of thing, which when you're in port wasn't just restricted to the bars and massage parlours it seems.

{Gary: But anyway, as I was saying before, when it was the radio officer we was alongside, we was all on day-work as it were, your turned in of an evening, because if you're alongside you didn't go to bed before midnight at the earliest. [something bougee] cos there'd be something going on, you'd be in the bar, like. We might throw a party, got contacts from ashore, send the girls on board, everyone. YWCA. things like that or you had girlfriends and their friends. And people you met.

Me: you were allowed to bring people on board?

Gary: oh yeah!

Me: Okay.

Gary: Oh yeh, I mean, they did bring in passes, so what the crew did, it was in Liverpool, they was handing passes out, going 'wanna go to a party on board a ship?' to complete strangers. But of course, they're all female. Of course. Yeah. Unless of course you were one of those rare people.

Me: Presumably everyone on board the ship at the time was working was male.

Gary: Oh, yeah. Male}

That said, as you might have gathered by now, my mother did join Gary on a couple of his voyages. This was actually more normal than you'd imagine, though of course it had limitations.

{Gary: We actually we had the electrician and his wife on board, you know because you allowed to take your wife and also only if you're an officer, tho I did see on one ship the bosun took his wife. That was that that was that was quite some of that allowed as well as it depends anything on the lifeboat space to the passengers in general, if don't have lifeboat space you've can't take them.}

And of course it goes without saying that you couldn't let it interfere with your working life and time. But I'm sure that sort of thing didn't happen. Much.

{section separation jingle}

After hearing all that, you might be wondering, well, does the Merchant Navy still exist? The answer is 'yes, but ...'.

{Gary: What you've gotta remember now, the merchant navy's changed a lot since I was there. It was one of the reasons I left actually.

It's become containerized, everything's containers now. So what were those those sort of vessels that was like side-loading which is where you had docks, y'had the famous Docks in Liverpool and in London, whatever like all the rest of Europe, it would load straight into the open that's all load on overhead cranes, in a container those particular vessels that was like you had winches on board so you can actually take the car out yourself. There was like, it was physically demanding. Not for me, but the actual doing the work itself was physically demanding, that's why we had the dockside cranes and yeah, those cranes and that's why you had an awful lot of workers & that's why they were so militant as well, all going on strike, right we're gonna do what we like. In New Zealand, if you were loading on a Sunday, they say 'no, we can't load for two hours cos we're going to go to church', that was one of the rules, they went to church, so you couldn't start loading on a Sunday until they were good and ready. Things like that's, that's what drove the nail in the coffin of those particular vessels. That's why we had containerization.

Now these days your lucky if you get a day in port, is quick turnaround. It's containerized. delivery rapid but that's because there were cargo refrigerated cargo general cargo ships, those ones we had there was other vessels, bulk carries, the like carrying grain in bulk and big ships, really big. big monster ships really big, come with a beautiful combination stuff like this. They'd only be alongside for about a day or so, that'll be it, and to the out of the way ports miles from every anywhere because of what they'd be carrying, could be carrying anything, steel, as I say grain, oil, oil tankers, obviously super super tankers, you're miles from anywhere}

It's a much quicker operation, much more efficient, requiring less admin and less crew to manage a much bigger ship.

Gary referred to the containerised vessels being 'big monster ships'. Wikipedia suggests that the largest container transport ships mostly have a Gross Tonnage in the 200,000s, so between about 15 and 20 times bigger than the one Gary first served on. They tend to be just shy of 400m long and around 60m wide; for comparison, this is a very similar size to the largest cruise ships operated by Royal Caribbean International, that I'm sure a couple of my listeners will have been on. There's a reason I've never done an episode about cruise ships, and it's not because I'm ignoring your interests.

More importantly though from a 'following in Gary's footsteps' viewpoint, note who owns and operates those largest container ships (and I know I'm only speaking here about the largest, but obviously the bigger the ship, the more dominant you are in the industry): Mediterranean Shipping Company (Switzerland), Maersk (Denmark), CMA CGM (France), Evergreen Marine (Taiwan), Ocean Network Express (Japan) ... Gary mentioned earlier that at the time he worked for them, P&O was the largest in the world. It's now just one of many subsidiaries of Maersk. These are huge conglomerates, headquartered in, well, not the UK. Indeed the majority of the top thirty companies are based in East or South-East Asia. The industry has definitely shifted over time.

So in a way, while the Merchant Navy still exists, in a sense, it's a very different beast and life to the one my step-dad led. Probably lonelier, in a sense, certainly less filled with interesting stories and notable events.

As I say my interview was over two hours long. If you want to hear the full version, I'll upload it to my Patreon. He tells more stories I couldn't fit into this episode, including one time when alcohol was not the only illicit

substance brought on board, one night of Shore Leave where the officers encountered Japanese food for the first time, and a bit about his later times working aboard vessels transporting nuclear waste.

{end pod jingle}

Well that's all for this episode. Join me next time for something very much on dry land. Until then, remember, don't mix Hyoscine or Scopolamine with alcohol, and if you're feeling off-colour, as you might on board, keep on getting better.

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}