

Lost at sea

Tales my grandfather would have told me. A sailor's life 1910-1941

A sailor's life – 49. Clan Line, or Shell?

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Shell tanker Donax 1919, private collection
Bert Sivell

Bert Sivell, formerly Mate of the sailing ship Monkbarns, joined the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Co (Shell) in autumn 1919 with a crisp new Master's ticket in his pocket barely a fortnight old.

He was 24, with hands-on experience of shipwreck, war and mutiny, but he signed on as humble 3rd mate in the oil tanker Donax for £18 5s 6d a month, "all bedding, linen and uniform accessories to be supplied by the Company".

He had arrived back in Britain just in time for the national peace day celebrations that July – parades and bunting and industrial unrest. After nine years at sea studying by kerosene lamp between watches, sitting scrambled tests in ports around the world for hurried promotions, he was to spend some weeks with his parents on the Isle of Wight, attending college on the mainland each morning, and relaxing at the weekends cycling through the country lanes or tramping miles across the chalk downs with friends. ("Girls, of course," he wrote to the girl who would be my grandmother.)



Peace day postcard

When he graduated top of his class with 89% marks after seven weeks, he was offered a job immediately, as 4th officer on a steamer departing for India that night. But he turned it down, saying “he was on holiday and had a few more girls to see.”

He posted off an application to the Clan Line of Glasgow, a comfortable, regular passenger-cargo steamship service to India, and then kicked himself when the Clan’s job offer finally caught up with him in Rotterdam two weeks later, in what was to be the first of many thousands of dreary out-of-town Shell oil refinery berths. But he didn’t repine at taking Shell’s shilling. Or not much.

The wave of national rail and coal strikes that racked Britain that summer almost as soon as the celebration bunting came down would have prevented him joining the ship, or so he reasoned.

And by then he was also discovering some of the advantages of life in the growing Shell oil tanker fleet. “A man can make money here,” he wrote home.

The food and pay were good, he said, and he had a comfy bed and a Chinese “boy” to bring him tea in the mornings and clean his shoes. “It seems to me life is one continuous meal aboard here. In the last ship we used to get one meal a week.”

Monkbarns had been 267 feet long and 23 feet wide, with a very old Old Man, two very young mates, sixteen teenage apprentices and a barely competent crew of a dozen or less, depending on desertions. Shell’s oil-fired steamer Donax by comparison was 348ft long and 47ft wide (... “half the length of Guildford Road, and about as wide...”) with a young master, four ambitious mates, a chief engineer with five junior officers of his own, a Marconi wireless operator, and more than thirty Chinese firemen and crew.



Sea mines still menaced the shipping lanes in 1919.

"When they float high out of the water, they are supposed to be 'dead'. Personally I have no desire to poke one of them to see," wrote Bert.

Life on Donax too was a world away from conditions aboard the old windjammer. Third officer Bert Sivell had his own clean, modern quarters with fitted cupboards, a writing desk and an armchair, electric lights and a fan, “and a dozen other things that one would never dream of in sail,” he wrote. The Chinese “boy” woke him at 7.30am each morning with hot buttered toast (“Real butter. Not margarine...”), and polished his boots until they shone like glass. Captain McDermuid was a jolly fellow, only 34 himself, who had welcomed his new juniors aboard with a bottle of wine. And the day the ship took on stores, Bert wrote in wonderment: “More stores have been sent to this vessel for a fortnight’s trip than would have arrived on the last one for a year.”

On top of the good pay, Shell offered a provident fund – 10% of salary, matched by 10% from the company plus a 15% annual bonus; three months holiday on half-pay every three years; and a £3 a month war bonus – because of the many sea mines still adrift undetected in the shipping lanes around Britain.

Above all, prospects for promotion were good. Anglo-Saxon Petroleum was expanding. Rapidly. In 1919 alone the company bought no fewer than 23 ships, to replace the eleven lost during the war. They were a mixed bag of former RN oilers built for the Admiralty and converted dry cargo carriers managed by the wartime Shipping Controller, but the company was agitating for permission from the National Maritime Board to raise its salaries by a further 40% (according to Bert's new captain) to man them all.

It had been a snap decision to join Shell, but Bert never again left the booming oil giant, nor the girl – my grandmother – whom he had equally hastily met, wooed and won that August.

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Written by Jay Sivell

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