

Lost at sea

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

A sailor's life – 54. Flaming funnels, Orthis 1920

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Orthis callactis Dalman fossil,
1828

“This morning a box arrived on board marked ‘fragile’ and on opening it what do you think I found? A glass case containing a couple of Orthis shells mounted on a piece of pearl and the vessel’s name engraved on another piece of pearl, the whole lot set off on blue plush. All the ships of the fleet have a similar case. It is supposed to be placed on the saloon sideboard, but as we have no saloon it will have to go in the messroom.”

26 May 1920, Millwall dock, London

The Shell tanker Orthis started life as the 1,144 grt creosol class [harbour oiler Oakol](#), bought cheap from the Royal Fleet Auxiliary during the oil group’s post-war shopping spree in 1919.



Shell tanker Orthis, formerly RFA Oakol -
Helderline collection

Named apparently after a Paleolithic fossil by someone in the company with a sense of humour, Orthis was small and scruffy, a dwarf against the purpose-built Donax and a fleabite to the 18,000 tonners being built in the US for Eagle Oil. She was a mess, and as new first mate it was Bert Sivell’s job to knock her into shape, supervising the new Chinese crew painting her into the company’s livery, and scouring and steaming the tanks until they were clean enough to carry benzene.

“What d’you think to the old yacht?” the marine superintendent at Shellhaven had said, inspecting the

vessel in June 1920, after a month's hard graft. For once Bert was tactful, blandly ignoring the little ship's tendency to shoot flames out of her funnel, fifteen or twenty feet high, which the refinery staff seemed to find unnerving.

("The shore people will not let us run our dynamo now in case a similar thing should happen, so we have to stop pumping at 9pm before we can have lights aboard.")

In two years flat the company was to snap up 32 surplus vessels, ranging from ex-RN oilers and dry goods carriers built for the Admiralty and the wartime Shipping Controller, to an old Canadian train ferry (Limax) and two halves of a refloated wreck (Radix). The Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Co. alone bought sixteen of the 416 government-commissioned "War" range of standard ships, six of the emergency wartime construction "Leaf" freighting tankers that had had to be put under civilian management because of the US neutrality act, and several former RFA "OI" oilers, including little Orthis-Oakol.



War Expert became Anomia

By late 1920, these ships were starting to take their places in the burgeoning Shell fleet: [War African became Absia](#), War Expert the unlvely Anomia ("Captain Cass her skipper says he's going to call her Amonia, it's the only way he can remember it..."), Aspenleaf, Briarleaf, Dockleaf and Elmleaf became Prygona, Lacuna, Litopia and Meloma, – the biggest of them only 7,550 grt.

Meanwhile, Orthis's engineers had spent the early summer twiddling and tweaking in Millwall dock, trying to tame the old oiler's combusting engines and wayward steering gear. (Judging by the dents in her hull, a long-standing problem, Bert mused.) He didn't repine though. Twice he managed a dash to see his parents on the Isle of Wight, once whisking Ena with him on the night mail; twice he managed a snatched evening with her in Tunbridge Wells after work, arriving at 6pm and running for the London train again at 10pm; and at Whitsun they achieved one glorious sunny weekend in each other's arms on the cliffs at Minster, where two weeks later he was sluicing the last of a load of dirty benzene out of his tanks into the Thames in a way that would give modern marine authorities a fit.



Rotterdam postcard harbour panorama 1920

Twice Orthis went to Rotterdam too, but all he ever saw was the tanks of the installation. “There was a little village about ten minutes walk from the ship, but it was not worth while going ashore,” he wrote. “In any case, I have quite enough to do on board. I still have an awful lot of writing as well as the ordinary work of running the ship and her crew and in addition I have to look after the victualling of the ship for which I receive the large sum of £3 per month as an extra.”

With that and the £3 war bonus and overtime, he was earning per month about three-quarters of what Ena earned per year – £40 making hats. Shell paid well.

In June they went to Helsingfors (Helsinki), via the Kiel canal, still dodging sea mines even in the North Sea but now with the added hazard of the erupting funnel.



Kiel canal postcard 1920

“Just before entering Holtenau lock at the Kiel end of the canal our funnel went afire at 1am and being a pitch black night of course everything was well lit up by the glare. All the Germans in the vicinity, including our pilot, got the “wind up” badly, but we are getting used to these little happenings. They are quite harmless as long as no benzine is about.”

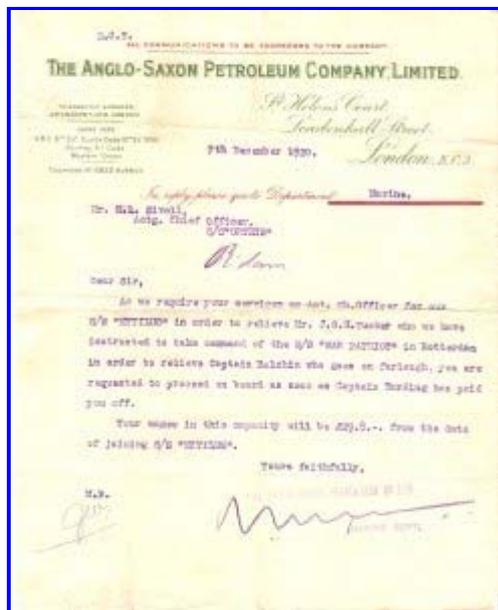
On the return journey, while navigating Brunsbittel lock, another eruption managed to ignite one of the lifeboats. “We caused great excitement among the shore community,” wrote Bert.

After Finland, when Bert and Captain Harding enjoyed two illicit evening trips ashore together, listening to the bands in the park, visiting the zoo, and not getting back to the ship until 1am – “when it was still light enough to read a newspaper” – the real work started. Up and down they ran to Hull and Granton, outside Edinburgh; 15 hour trips, pumping as soon as they were alongside and sailing again as soon as they’d done. Bert barely got his clothes off and the overtime was ratcheting up nicely, but there were no flying visits to Tunbridge Wells, just more paperwork for dented jetties – and an inquest.

(En route back from Scotland a fire had broken out in the “European” galley, fatally injuring the Chinese chief cook. They swung the tanker into the wind to prevent the flames spreading and Bert doctored the all-too conscious victim with carron oil and opium, swaddling him in wadding, lint and sheets. But the poor man was too far gone. The tanker put back into Leith, and the cook was ferried ashore in a lifeboat, and Bert went with him in the horse drawn ambulance over the cobbles. But the doctor said it was a hopeless case. An enquiry ensued.)

“My dearest sweetheart, I am so sorry you only had one letter from Thameshaven but on these short runs I don’t seem about to fit in the time for much letter writing. We were only 15 hours in Hull and a few minutes under 24 hours at Thameshaven, so you can imagine how much spare time the ‘poor’ mate gets after he has finished with cargo and the thousand odd jobs in getting ready for sea again ...

The spring-clean is going on very, very slowly. It will be some weeks before I can make this thing look anything like one of the 'Shell' line vessels and I expect as soon as I have finished the job I shall get a transfer to another old rattle box."



Shell's (unusually chatty) official letter appointing Bert Sivell to its oil tanker Mytilus

The transfer when it came, came quickly. In December 1920 Bert was appointed acting chief officer of the 5,000 tonner Mytilus. Captain McDermid of Donax, whom he met in Rotterdam that January, took all the credit and fished out a bottle of port to celebrate.

"He told me that when I was with him he had had special orders to watch me and report back accordingly. He says Donax is altogether a different ship since I left." Shell was negotiating the building of 40 more Donax-type ships in US, according to McDermid – on top of twenty-six (he said) already under construction all over the world. Thirteen were due for commission that year. "Think of the master's jobs..."

McDermid predicted Bert would be master himself in three years.

Read on: [Dublin and the troubles, 1920](#)
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Work in progress: the book I never wrote about the sailor grandfather I never knew, from apprenticeship on the square-rigger Monkbarne to death by U97
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