



Docklands History Group meeting Wednesday 5th September 2007

Down Memory Lane - Tugs

By Michael Wenban

Mick introduced himself and explained that he was one of the Gravesend sharks, a master of one of the Svitzer tugs based at Gravesend and a Freeman of the River. His family had been traced back on the river to 1666 and he had grown up in Clarendon Road next to Royal Terrace Pier, under which pier he had learnt to swim. In 1961 while still at school he had been apprenticed to his father. His father and the Sutherlands had run the last working Bawley boats until it became uneconomic and they earned only 5s a gallon for shrimp. Since then he had been involved in ship mooring although he had done various jobs on the river and had worked on passenger craft, including at one time the Marchioness.

He started his talk by giving a potted history of tugs on the river. The first tug company in the world was William Watkins formed in 1833. It started with one tug, the Monarch. When it escorted ships in from the estuary it ran out of coal at Gravesend. It was followed in 1860 by Dick and Page. They were black old tugs when his father worked for them. Next came Alexander's Sun Tugs. From an office at Wapping they went out round the pubs to organise towage. Gamecock tugs started up in the 1880s and were very smart looking and about that date Gaselees also started up. Gaselees had the best lightermen on the river and worked from Richmond down to Ridham handling craft (barges) and ship work. After the war J. P. Knights, a Thames company, moved out to Medway. There were Ring tugs owned by pilots at Gravesend which were taken over in 1932 by William Watkins.

Mick remembered being told by his skipper that, when he was a mate, he had had to ask his skipper's permission to get married. He married on a Saturday and was picked up by the tug as soon as the ceremony was over and saw his wife again the next day.

Gaselees, Watkins, Dick & Page and Gamecock tugs merged and were then based at Woolwich Pier. They were then joined by Sun tugs, because the work had dropped off. They became known as London Tugs. In 1975 the Alexandra Towing Company was based in Liverpool and was a good family firm, but it was asset stripped by an Australian company Adsteam. Now Svitzer, which was part of the Maersk group had taken over from Adsteam. It currently had five ship towing tugs at Gravesend and six in the Medway. It employs three crew to a tug and they work one week on and one week off, as opposed to one day on and one day off which was the previous pattern.

Mick had started his first job on 5 November 1962 on the old Muria which was bringing a ship out of the King George V dock. It was thick fog in South Woolwich and he had walked through the pipe to North Woolwich Pier to meet the tug. There had been a crew of eight and it had been his job to cook using coal and scrub the floor. They had had oil lamps and a bucket of water. He had had to go to bed at 10 pm and get up at 6 am and, if he had a break, he got his head down. First thing in the morning he had had to clean out and lay the skipper's fire and get everyone pint pots of tea.

In 1962 the river was at its zenith with a sea of people working on it, but despite this everyone knew everyone else. After 18 months he became a 3rd hand junior deckhand. This promotion came quickly because the Tilbury Dock extension was being built at the time and people had left to go to Tilbury. Because of the redundancies it took him a long time to make mate.

When there was fog or smog on the river the tugs would anchor. He told the story of a skipper called Tommy who used to come to work with a small suitcase in which he kept four bottles of milk stout and an apple. One day they had had to moor up because of fog and Tommy had been invited, by a friend, aboard another boat for a drink. The fog had lasted for several days and when they were finally ready to proceed Tommy had had to be lowered bound to a board onto the tug from the other boat!

Whenever there was a nicker (collision) down the Reach the tugs would head off as the first to arrive would get the money. Kipper Cable had gone looking for the British Builder which had run ashore on the Goodwins and by pure luck was the first to see her, so he had aimed straight for her and got her off. Afterwards he was complimented for his knowledge of the Sands, as he had approached her up the one indent in that stretch of sand. He had not known the Sands or the peril he was in, and it had been pure luck!

The old tugs emitted much black smoke but this changed after the Clean Air Act. Today they still had to get the temperature right to avoid smoking.

In the war many watermen had lost their livelihoods as shipping had left London. The Royal Terrace Pier in Gravesend had been the hub of tug operations. His dad had been there one day when the Royal Navy had asked for volunteers. His dad had ended up on "Challenge" at Dunkirk. Mick had a tin helmet at home which his father had taken from a dead Guard's officer killed by his side in a bombardment. The volunteers from Gravesend had not been given any protection. The skipper, Charlie Parker, backed in stem first with anchors out so that they could pull themselves off the shallow flat beach. When they went in late in the evacuation Mick's dad had shouted at some soldiers "did they want a lift to England", only to find they were Germans!

There was a skipper on the Hibernia who must have been in his 70's, and after 40 years on the tug he had asked to retire and been told he was not allowed to until the Hibernia was replaced.

The steam tugs were followed by motor tugs. The stokers went, then the junior deck hand, the cook and the second engineer. Now only the skipper, mate and engineer were left and there was even talk of two-man handling. Their company did not do sea work now as it was too expensive. The tugs in Medway covered the Havens and came round to help out in the Thames when necessary. They needed five tugs in the Medway for the gas ships but did not have much work at other times.

It was sad how dilapidated the Port of London had become. There was no investment in the river and no dry docks any longer, save one in Tilbury where the caissons were no longer water tight. The other problem was that most people were not taking on apprentices. Mick had an apprentice who would also be trained on lighters and passenger craft. The MCA had eased the requirements so that European qualifications were recognised on the river. The PLA had recently employed masters from overseas as pilots. He and his colleagues had had to go to College in 1990 and get STW90 qualifications as masters.

Tugs are still needed because it was only in ideal conditions that all the latest technology could be deployed on its own. For example, Cobelfret who come in each day would check the speed of the wind at Broadness and take a tug if the wind speed was 22 knots. Grimaldi used tugs to get through Tilbury Dock entrance because it had only a minute margin for error, and then a waterman would take their ships up the dock. Maersk had tried not using tugs in Felixstowe, but the ships had taken so long berthing that they had been surcharged, because they were holding up the next user of the berth and so they had resumed using tugs. It was too dangerous for a tug to attempt to pick up a tow if the fog was six cables or under or there were seven knots or more of tide.

Svitzer would be renaming their tugs to incorporate the name Svitzer as each tug was dry docked. The company had sent his boat Cobham up to the Humber and two other tugs. Mick assisted ships at Tilbury Power Station and up river. He had been into South Dock six times so far this year. Mick preferred Voiht-Schneider tugs which towed from aft. However, most of the ship handling tugs on the river now were Z-Pellers which had the towing winch forward. They were cheaper than Voiht-Schneider but you could not lose concentration for a minute when you were operating one of them. Svitzer had mostly Z-Pellers as did Targe Towing, employed by BP at Coryton, which had three tugs (and employed four crews). These tugs had a bollard pull of say 60 to 70 tonnes. In the past tugs had had less power and had had to use the tide. To swing ships into the Surreys the tug used to go aground to be pulled off by the ship at the correct angle to take the ship in. Today when you saw tugs going backwards it was to cut down the swell.