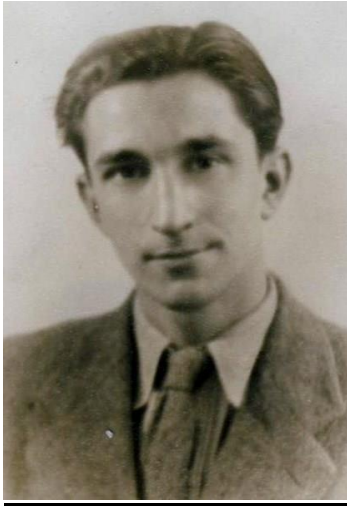


Stan Gray's 2nd DGEng BUGLE



Stan talks about earlier times.

So we are asked for memories, even pre-DGEng or perhaps to emulate Malcolm's short adventure. No way can I match his three-mode journey but I can offer my best by sea and my worst by rail if I go back to my earliest days in engineering:-

Big Apple By Cunard



RMS Antonia outward bound from Liverpool

Liverpool being the home of Cunard, the company offered engineering students at the university the 'work experience' of a vacation voyage. Four of us aimed to prolong the trip by opting for a sailing from Liverpool to New York via Belfast and Halifax Nova Scotia, taking some ten days over it. The RMS Antonia was one of three 'A' class Intermediate liners entering service in 1922. Built primarily for the Canadian run they were essentially emigrant ships and I have read of a Cunard advertisement in the 1930s offering passages at £3 with children under 17 going free. Accommodating 500 cabin and 1200 3rd class passengers, with large

cargo capacity, Antonia was of 13,867 gross tonnage and 520ft. overall length. Twin-screw steam turbine drive gave her a speed of some 15 knots.

Boarding one evening in March 1937 we reported to the Purser and were signed on as supernumerary engineers at one shilling a month. There being no room in engineer's quarters, we were told, you will be sleeping cabin class but for eating and otherwise you are crew. You can mix with the passengers when not on duty. Just keep your noses clean, stay out of trouble ... and strictly no females in your cabins! If they invite you into theirs that's quite another matter. Keep out of the way till morning then report to the Chief Engineer. We stayed up on deck to see us out of the Mersey then went to our bunks.

Cabin class it was, but by no means "starred" accommodation. Our two-bunk cabins had washbasins. Baths and toilets were down the corridor but there were pots under the bunks for night use or for poor sailors. I recall having to lever my way into the tightly made up bedding but once between the sheets there was no way I could fall out whatever the weather! An abstract of the log for the passage reported conditions varying from gentle breeze to moderate gale, slight sea and swell to rough quarterly sea and heavy swell. Fortunately we turned out to be good sailors and soon found our sea legs.

I have little recollection of the social life on board, it was for the life below deck that we were there and you couldn't get much further below than the engine room floor, finally reached by steel grid walkways and rather steep steps. These were best taken at the run, leaning back with the hands sliding down the rails and timed to the pitch of the ship reducing the effective steepness, a technique demonstrated to perfection by the steward 'gliding' down, one hand on rail the other balancing a tray of steaming hot drinks for the mid-shift break.

We were put on watch two-by-two. On my first duty we were given a large spanner each and taken behind the oil-fired boilers, probably the hottest and dirtiest place on board. Shown an elbow in a largish pipe we were told to take it out and report back. This we did. "Did any water come out?" "No" "Good, you can put it back." Perhaps a little initiation for these college boys in their white boiler suits? Actually we were made very welcome. When first shown around, we were warned particularly

about the watertight doors. You keep the lever on this side held firmly down to open the door and to step through with one foot, then hold down the lever on the far side while you step right through. We had one of your college lads who wore rubber-soled shoes (we had been warned against that). He slipped, fell over the threshold and the door closed on him. He will bear the marks on his backside for the rest of his life...but he wouldn't have had any "rest of his life" if the door had been working to full pressure. We certainly took the warning to heart. Daily tests from the bridge checked that their emergency remote control would shut all the doors. They always did, but with the test over there usually seemed to be some maintenance going on.

For my first bath in the engineer's quarters I tried out the option of hot seawater so set it running while I stripped off. Turning back I was somewhat alarmed by the level of water in the jumbo-sized bath, but stepped in, laid down full length...and floated! Too late I felt the ship, and bath, pitch in a heavier swell causing the water level to surge up at the head, cascading over the end and flooding the floor. Diving for the plug, I hastened my toilet and mopped up as best I could with my towel.

Running at near constant load for days on end we were soon absorbed into the engine-room routine. Regular records were kept of pressures, temperatures etc. This involved trips right to the stern down the long, dim shaft tunnels to take optical torque meter readings measuring the small twist over the full length of the shafts for the estimate of power to the propellers. Essential oil circulation to bearings and the double-reduction gearing was provided by a pair of steam-driven pumps, which had a bad habit of stopping at odd times. Depending on the position of the steam valve spindle, up or down, restarting was by a sharp tap with a spanner on the hexagonal head or by flipping it up with the tip of the spanner. The condensers' large air extraction pumps had a similar but less frequent habit and required a similar treatment.

At Halifax we had a rather unsteady walk ashore, our sea legs missing the regular movement underfoot. There was little to see in the docks area except for the monument to the catastrophe of the 6th.December 1917 when a ship fully loaded with wartime explosives was accidentally detonated. The huge explosion laid waste to over three quarters of a square mile of the local area, devastating the city, killing some 2000 people and injuring over 9000 more. Then it was 'Full Ahead' for the two-day or so passage to New York, the engine room hoping that the Captain might beat the tide this time and give us an extra night in town, for he had a

reputation as a bit of a ditherer. Sure enough, we had a number of periods of reduced speed, missed the tide and had to anchor in the approaches.

With limited time for New York's iconic highlights we didn't get to the Statue of Liberty but we did the tourist trip up the Empire State Building (the world's tallest) did a little shopping at Macy's Departmental Store (the world's biggest) and went to the cinema at Radio City Music Hall (the world's grandest). Built in the depression and only opened in 1933, it has been dubbed 'the secular cathedral of New York City'. By 1978, as reported by Alistair Cooke in his Letter From America of 13 Jan, the place had been losing about three million dollars a year and was to close down. That raised such a public outcry, from the very people who were failing to support it, that it was indeed saved "for the nation and posterity...as the masterpiece of Art Deco." Awed as I was by the "immense Grand Foyer with its mammoth mirrors and 29ft. chandeliers", to quote from Cooke, and overwhelmed by the "enormous vault" of the cinema, seating over 6000 people, I have no idea what film we saw, but I do recall the (world's largest) Wurlitzer rising up for organ music in the interval. On spending a penny in the "Roman urinal ...with towering ceiling and black-and-white marble stalls" I can only echo the man, quoted by Cooke as saying "it sure makes ones anatomy look awfully shabby!"

We finished with one of those burlesque shows, of 'naughty' repute as we had heard. The performance was continuous and when the lights went up between acts any seat vacated towards the front was promptly occupied by someone climbing over from behind. Rows were increasingly crowded the nearer they were to the stage with its projecting 'cat-walk' where the girls paraded over the audience, which was by no means entirely male. There were the chorus girls, song -and dance acts, stand-up (blue) comics and highly suggestive sketches typically bedroom scenes and doctor's surgeries. Then the solo dancers with fans or feathers and little else...and of course the strippers. The performance of one in particular was received with great enthusiasm as she proceeded to undress at some length down to the obligatory minimum three-piece, which in this case consisted of a pair of 'danglers' and what is presumably described as a G-string. Well this was one of the famous Minsky brothers' theatres and their star, renowned for her "classy and witty" display of striptease, with the emphasis on 'tease', was then in her prime, as I much later discovered. So I like to think that we had probably been privileged to see the legendary Gypsy Rose Lee...in the flesh so to speak. Just in time too, as I was also to learn later. Moral anti-burlesque

campaigns had the support of the 'reformist' mayor La Guardia and shows were often raided by police. In April of 1937 an infringement of regulations (a missing G-string) at a Minsky theatre down in Harlem led to a successful prosecution, providing a legal loophole enabling the city licence commissioner to revoke the theatre's licence and refuse to renew all the rest.

So ended a form of entertainment opposed as obscene in its day but which, truth to tell, would be judged as distinctly crude and rather tame by present-day TV standards.

The return crossing was uneventful apart from steeage passengers' protests, some three days out from Halifax, about bad smells from deck cargo loaded there. So a sailor was to be seen on deck broaching the casks, which contained 'live' frogs and terrapins, intended for France, and dumping the creatures into a bucket of water. Any that kicked were retained but the rest were flung overboard, so for some days we had frog's legs and terrapins on the menu, in one form or another. We were to dock in London but called first at Plymouth and I was on duty at the starboard turbine steam valve as we approached. At sea speed changes were infrequent but getting into harbour was another matter, the twin screws being used as an aid to manoeuvring. Orders transmitted from the bridge by the ship's 'telegraph' rang a warning bell and moved a pointer to the required speed sector on the clock-like dial of the engine room instrument. This was acknowledged by moving an outer indicator on a pivoted handle to a matching position, which also changed the position of the pointer on the dial of the bridge's instrument. All went well until I received an order that set my pointer bang on the line between two sectors. Opting for one of them I set my handle clearly in the middle and started to wind the steam valve wheel. Wrong of course! Hasty 'ding-dongs' from the bridge put me back to the other sector. We made the berth all right so I can fairly claim to have driven half the ship into Plymouth harbour.

Then it was off to London where we were discharged, paid our shilling each and given rail warrants to return to Liverpool as our 'home' port. An interesting experience but it did nothing to encourage me towards a career in marine engineering.

The Antonia was requisitioned for war-service in 1939, ferrying troops from Canada and evacuees back, before being converted as a repair vessel for the Navy. She supported operations in the Med and the Far East for the rest of the war, returning home

in 1946, dogged by mechanical problems, to be finally broken up for scrap in 1948

Home by Rail

As an honours engineering graduate in 1938, but having gone to university straight from school, I was only eligible for Student membership of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers until I had acquired adequate 'approved' experience, commonly achieved through a form of 'student', as distinct from 'trade' apprenticeship. So I was glad to be offered a place at C.A.Parsons & Co of Newcastle on Tyne, steam turbine pioneers and a major manufacturer for electric generator sets and for the Navy...at a starting salary of £250 per annum.

It was my good fortune in the following year to be included in a staff exchange for two months or so with the Escher Wyss works at Zurich, makers of similar products. It was a particularly good time to be there for the city was hosting the Schweizerische Landesausstellung. This spectacular exhibition of Swiss life was only held at 25-year intervals. The last one was interrupted by the 1914 war and it was beginning to look as if this one might suffer the same fate, for we were into August 1939 and the war clouds were gathering ominously.



In the Swiss National Exhibition Zurich 1939

The Swiss seemed pretty calm; accustomed as they were to compulsory national service it was commonplace to see 'city' gents, briefcase in hand and a rifle over the shoulder, ready to put in some of their obligatory firing practice after work. They had their gear and orders; a simple radio call-up and they would be off to base. I was told that they could probably only hold the frontier for a matter of days if attacked, then it would be up to mountain bases to continue resistance.

Typically, the official consular advice was that if there was no compelling need to stay one should return home; should war break out we would be interned as combatant nationals, for repatriation as and when! Indeed, one of our group had dual English and Swiss nationality and would be liable for military service there. As the news got worse we thought it prudent to check on train and ferry schedules but at the station we were told that normal timetables had been suspended, a boat train for Calais was to leave that evening and was the last that could be guaranteed. That settled it; we handed in the travel warrants for our return journey then it was back to the digs, pack up and pay up and reassemble at the station.

We were in good time and settled ourselves in an empty compartment in the corridor train...but not for long. It was rapidly filling and soon it was a matter of 'women and children first'. An agitated middle-aged lady in full fur coat was hustled into the compartment by porters, along with an expensive looking set of matching suitcases, hat box, soft bags, handbag etc. So we gave up, took down our luggage and resigned ourselves to a trip in the corridor, which itself was soon packed end-to-end.

This was no Orient Express and we were ill prepared for the journey; some chocolate and sweets perhaps but if food and drink was available on the train we certainly never could have reached it. Leaving the station in the dark we continued so, for a full blackout had been imposed on the train. Before long even the struggle to the end of the coach for the toilet was not to be attempted, unless in dire extremity, for the water supply had run out, the floor was swimming and the place was a mess!

The stop at the border was chaotic, no way could passport checks be made. France appeared to be partially mobilised; at the few stations where we stopped there seemed to be only military personnel about and with unknown waiting times no attempt to find food or facilities was to be risked. Trying to snooze sitting on luggage or on the corridor floor the night seemed interminable, but inevitably dawn came at last and in due course the train rolled to a stop at Calais port station and disgorged its load of dishevelled passengers. We helped the fur-clad lady down to the platform with her load. Now in near-hysterics she was calling for porters...some hope! So we had to share her luggage between us and shepherd her off to the waiting ferry, where we thankfully left her to the care of the crew.

I have no clear recollection of the crossing or the boat train to London, no doubt we looked for food and seats and we would surely find usable toilets.

Then it was over to King's Cross for the next train to Leeds, so that I could call on my parents before returning to Newcastle. Not quite end of story however; I don't remember if I found a seat but I was certainly in the corridor as the train slowed to a stop just short of the station and there we waited...and we waited. It was particularly galling for we were stuck on an embankment and bridge over a street on my bus route out of Leeds and in plain view was a stop I could use. Still we waited. Half an hour or more... I don't know, but it was long enough for people to start getting off the train and walking along the track. So I got to the door, dropped out my rucksack (my only luggage) and jumped out after it, scrambled down the embankment, climbed over the wall and crossed over the street to wait for a bus. Seven miles by road and under a mile on foot and I was home to a warm welcome, a hearty meal and the comfort of my old bed.

I did manage to get up the following day, the third of September, in time to hear the Prime Minister's radio announcement that we were at war with Germany and also to hear our first air raid siren.

Stan Gray

(A fascinating story Stan during a very fast moving period of English history. Thank you for this additional Bugle write-up)