BIBULOUS BIBLIOPHILES

Grandad's time on a Training Ship

To the left of the fireplace, in the living room at 17 Beddington Road, was a built-in cupboard. The upper section had glass glazed doors which were always locked, and Nan kept all her favourite bits and pieces of chinaware there. The lower section  was where, among other things, they stored those various odds and ends that people keep for sentimental reasons, or just don't want to throw away because it might come in useful one day - but rarely does.

I remember a large square biscuit tin. It was one of those large tins they used when you bought half a pound of loose biscuits from the grocery store years ago. Over the years the tin had gradually become dented and rusty and much of the Huntly and Palmer paper label was missing, but it had not been thrown out. Sometimes Grandad would get it out and let me open it up and rummage through the contents.

"What's this Grandad?"

"That's a lifeboat whistle."

"How do you use it?" I'd ask, and Grandad could be relied on to amuse me for five or ten minutes with yarns about lifeboats on ships. He'd tell me all about what the lifeboat contained and why the whistle was there - and why and how you could use the whistle to send a message in the fog using Morse code. We'd be having a great time, blowing SOS's until Nan would tell us to shut up because we were giving her a headache.

There were all sorts of bits and pieces in the tin. I remember it contain his WWI medals, his service ribbons, various brass buttons and cap badges he'd kept and a large collection of photos, mainly snapshots. They were held together with string around them. It was also chock full of old useless stuff: old cigarette cases, broken cigarette lighters, broken watches, old hat pins, and such like. I can't remember what ninety percent of it was now - but it kept me quiet, going through it and asking him questions.

As I said, there were a lot of photos, but I can only remember a few. One was the one of Nan and Grandad taken in Sainsbury's garden, which I've mentioned elsewhere. Another was a lovely, larger, studio photo of a family group, probably taken in about 1922. It showed Nan with her five children and was probably taken to celebrate the arrival of the latest baby, Bobby, who was being held in her arms. Actually, Bobby's real name is Albert Alfred, but he decided at a young age he didn't like those names, so he rechristened himself Bobby, after Bobby Lennard, another little boy he'd play with at his Granny Painters.

"That's your Uncle Arch; that's your Dad; that's your Uncle Jack . . ." explained Grandad as he pointed to each of his children. "And that's your Nanny", as if I needed to be told. He was very proud of the photo, even if all of boys looked uncomfortable in their high-laced hob nailed boots, long socks above the knees, and little schoolboy caps. Recently, I asked Uncle Bob if he still had the photo, but although he remembered it, he had no idea what happened to it. He thought my Aunt Dolly had taken most of the photos after Nan died and he'd not kept in touch with her. Dolly's been dead for 25 years or more now, and Fred Poole, her husband, remarried again, I believe, so tracking them down would be difficult to say the least. If anyone is interested in making the effort though, they lived at Clacton on sea.

I can't remember what the other photos were, with the exception of several pictures of old sailing ships that looked like Nelson's "Victory". They were commemorative replicas of black and white photos, with writing on the back of them. One was of a ship with the yards manned by cadets, the other showing the moored ship beam on. I was lucky enough to recover copies of these on the internet.

*The Training Ship Worcester*

“Why are these in with the photos, Grandad," I asked.

He took them from me and looked at them with some affection. He took one of them and said, "I was on that ship when I was not much older than you." I remember it was the picture of the old sailing ship taken beam on. "That's where I learnt how to be a sailor."

I suppose I would have been about ten years old at the time, and had seen similar such pictures of the "Victory". This ship looked just like her.

*The Training Ship Exmouth*

"Is that the 'Victory'?" I asked.

"No, no, that's at Portsmouth. This is a training ship on the Thames that they sent me to."

I remember asking him if it was still afloat and he said it was and that it was moored at Greenhithe. My recollection has always been that he said the name of the vessel was the ['Arethusa'](http://www.bibulousbibliophiles.com/alan_villiers_and_bill_palfreyma.htm#t_ships), and my recollection is that he said, "She was one of Nelsons ships". *(In fact I've found out that none of the training ships on the Thames at that time could have been one of Nelsons ships from the Napoleonic Wars. There was a frigate Arethusa that was one of Nelson's ships, but the training ship of that name on the Thames in the 1890's was a replacement built about 1840. But two other training ships on the Thames at that time, the Warspite and the Goliath, were replacements, of similar design, built about 1830, for Nelson ships of the line of the same name. There was also a TS Exmouth - which is in fact the ship he was on - of the same vintage, on the Thames, which had been named after Sir Edward Pellew, one of Nelson's heroes, and who had been made Lord Exmouth. Maybe my recollection is faulty on this point and and he said she was named after one of Nelson's hero's. The earlier Goliath took part in the battles of the Nile, and Cape Vincent. So Grandad could, I suppose, be excused for his slight "inaccuracy". At that stage, and indeed until recently, I had no idea of the number of Training Ships that existed in those days.*

*The original Arethusa moored at Greenhithe*

When years later I casually learnt that the 'Arethusa' was a training ship on the River Medway, I took it that my memory had failed me as to the actual location, and I continued thinking that the Arethusa was the training ship he'd been on.



The second Arethusa (Ex Peking) moored in the Medway. This ship now in New York harbour

The picture of the ship he said he served on showed she was maintained in good condition, and I asked if he'd ever been out to sea on a voyage in her. "Oh Lord no, that photo was taken when she first started out as a training ship, years before I went on her. By the time I got there she was just a hulk."

I distinctly remember him saying it was a hulk and my being disappointed. At that time, to me, a hulk was a dirty old discarded wreck, but I didn't pass comment. Later I learn that The Royal Naval term for a hulk, simply meant that the ship had been decommissioned, anything valuable removed, and no further money was to be spent on her. But never the less, some of the pictures I've found of training ships that were coming towards the end of their useful lives, showed that they were indeed just dirty old wrecks!

When I was a little boy my Grandad would often make little comments about what things were like when he was my age. I've forgotten most of the things he said, but they were always humorous and interesting. I never heard him speak bitterly or complain about his childhood situation, so I just assumed he had a happy time like I did. A few things he told me suggested that times were sometimes hard for his family, but nothing of what he said prepared me for the shock when I eventually found out just how horrible it was on the training ships at that time.

My Grandad was born on the 31st December 1883. But his actual time of birth must have been close to midnight and no one actually looked at the clock. So sometimes he said his birthday was the 31st December and sometimes he said it was the 1st January. The actual birth certificate states 31st December.

When Grandad was only five years old, his father died from an epileptic fit. The condition originated from a kick in the head he received from a horse about seven years previously. This is covered in the story 'Grandad's Origins'. His mother, Kate, found herself faced with having to bring up five children, the eldest being 11 years old, with no man about the house. Grandad never ever made any comment to my Mother or I of the tragic similarity of fate that had resulted in a similar situation occurring when my own Dad was killed and I, the eldest, was also only eleven years old.

Grandad was the second youngest in his family. His little brother, Jimmy, was killed by yet another tragic horse accident. This incident is also covered in 'Grandad's Origins'. By this time the three elder girls had possibly left home and Grandad told me it was his job to look after Jimmy when his Mum went to work. Sometimes she worked as a cook in a restaurant, but she also seems to have been working as a domestic servant in a large household at the time Grandad was born as he was named after her employer who was good to the family.

I suspect Grandad felt himself partly responsible for his little brother's death. It was a very painful memory for him. My Uncle Bob recalled finding him in tears after remembering the incident (see Grandad's Origins).

When Grandad was eleven and a half his mother approached the St. Pancras Parish Poor Law Authorities with a request that he be admitted to the Training Ship Exmouth. Strictly speaking this school was only for destitute children, (children who had no home or family), or children of paupers (people with no financial livelihood or income), so she must have been in desperate circumstances to have to make the approach and been accepted.

However, from the letter she wrote to the authorities during Grandad's time on the TS Exmouth, it would appear she possibly tried to get him on the TS Exmouth because it would give him training as a sailor, but she didn't fully realise that it was specifically designated for destitute children and that in fact she was signing him "away". Once accepted the children became the sole "property" of the authorities until the age of 18, and parents and family were rarely permitted any further contact with their children. Even letters to them were intercepted and confiscated by the authorities.

It is also possible that a relative advised her that the Exmouth was a suitable place to send Grandad. Two previous Painters were among the intake of cadets to the Exmouth. Early on in the Exmouth's life, when she had only recently been commissioned, two other Painters had attended her. They were J. Painter, Ship's Number 123 (Watchbill No. 123), age 14. Parish or Union : Lambeth. His date of Admission was 18.5.1876, and date of discharge 19.10.1878 to s.s. Lyra. Lambeth is the adjoining parish to where Grandad's father, Richard James Painter was born, so George Painter could possibly have been a relation - even the uncle who did well in Australia and returned to visit the family shortly before Grandad went into the ship. This will be further researched.

Likewise, E. Painter, Ship's Number 331 (Watchbill No. 422), age 12, Parish or Union : St. George's East, was admitted on 15.1.1877, and discharged 19.12.1879 to the Grenadier Guards. St George's East is a parish adjoining St Pancras where Grandad came from, so he also could have been a relation who advised Kate.

The concept of using redundant Admiralty ships for housing people was not new. Hulks had been used as supplementary accommodation for the overcrowded prisons for more than two hundred years. Indeed, the loss of the American colonies in 1770 and the inability to transport felons there resulted in chronic overcrowding of the prison hulks and led to the eventual introduction of the transportation of felons to Australia in 1778.

To digress for a moment, the flagship of the first fleet sent to Australia, the Sirius, was built at Rotherhithe and departed from there when the fleet sailed. She was still having unfinished work done on her when she left and it was common practice for Dockyard tradesmen to sign on for the voyage. The Painter's came from Rotherhithe which at that time was only a small dockyard village. R.J.P. (Grandad's father) was born in 1850 at Rotherhithe, and Uncle Bob remembers an uncle who had a carrying business using horse drawn carts to deliver materials from the docks. A James Painter, who was a shipwright/carpenter's mate, was a member of the Sirius's crew and it is interesting to speculate whether this was the uncle - or a descendant of his who was the Australian visitor mentioned in Playing Hooky.

Also, the Vimeira, another convict ship, which arrived in Australia in 1852 from London, contained a crewmember William Painter, an able-bodied seaman, who deserted ship to join the goldrush then in progress.

As mentioned, there were also two previous Painters (genealogy as yet untraced) who served on the Exmouth, and yet another on the Arethusa, - which Grandad had also claimed he attended. So it does seem as if there was some previous history of Painters and the sea that could have influenced his mother Kate's decision to seek Grandad's admission to a training ship.

The use of redundant Admiralty ships for training boys for a seafaring life originated back in the Napoleon wars. The Arethusa was operated by The Shaftesbury Homes Association, a philanthropic society set up by Lord Shaftesbury about 1865. But there were many other organisations. The Marine Society, of which Lord Nelson was a founding member, set up an organisation to provide shelter and education for destitute children and at the same time help alleviate the difficulties of recruiting seamen. The Warspite is perhaps the most famous training ship this Authority operated and provided a model for the Metropolitan Asylums Board to copy with the Goliath in 1870, followed by the Exmouth in 1876.

The Exmouth, Goliath, Arethusa and Warspite were all wooden walled warships built around 1830-1840. Although they sometimes changed their moorings, as they outstayed their welcome, they spent most of their lives in the Greenhithe or Grays area, on the lower reaches of the Thames.

With the introduction around 1850, of ironclad warships that were steam powered, the older warships, had become superseded and by the 1870's were obsolete. As Britain had followed the "double parity" policy since the Napoleonic wars, of always having a Naval fleet with an overall power greater than the combined power of the next two most powerful nations, there were always plenty of ships coming out of commission for hulking or break-up. The various training ship establishments, who provided trained boys for the Navy, were always seeking suitable vessels, and the Admiralty was generous with the supply of such ships, which were usually provided on a "free on loan" basis. They even paid the training ships a bounty of between ten pounds and fifteen pounds for each boy joining the Royal Navy who had reached a certain level of proficiency in seamanship. This gradually developed into a situation where there were scores of "training ships" located around the British coast-line by the end of the nineteenth century, purporting to being Nautical Training Schools. Often they were little more than money making exercises for emptying the workhouses, or a means of incarcerating street arabs who were regularly rounded up by the authorities. Indeed some "training ships" such as the Cornwall, at Woolwich, were out and out reformatories, where young hardened criminals were sent as a last resort.

Usually the ships were in good order and condition when passed over by the Admiralty, even though much of what was valuable or salvageable had been stripped from them. They were recognisably significant sailing warships, as the painting of the Warspite at hand-over in 1876 shows. General practice was, however, for the training authority to spend the absolute minimum on maintenance. So before too many years had passed, spars, followed by topmasts, began to disappear as rot set in and rigging deteriorated. Then various doghouses would be built over the decks to increase accommodation. Sometimes, complete shanty structures were thrown up over the deck to prevent water entry through rotten and leaking decks. Finally, after the vessel had sunk at its moorings, or had been burnt out by recalcitrant cadets, another vessel was introduced, often being re-named the same as her predecessor, which makes for difficult identification of old photos.

The Exmouth followed such a fate. Commissioned in 1876, the low headroom common in such ships made her impractical for any other activity below decks other than eating or sleeping. She lost her spars, doghouses were built on her decks, and stoves were installed to prevent the boys freezing to death in the depths of winter. They slept all year round in hammocks and the wind whistled through the old badly fitting gun ports. By 1905, seven years after Grandad had left her, she looked very different to the TS Exmouth of 1876.

In 1905 she was replaced by a purpose built vessel, which was a "replica" of the original. This vessel had higher headroom, more accommodation, and better attention to fire hazards, it being built of riveted steel plate.

It occurred to me that when Grandad told me, about 1953, that the ship he had been on was still moored on the Thames for me to look at if I wanted to, he was probably unaware that the original Exmouth had been replaced in 1905. When the replacement was made, he was in the Far East, living there from about 1901-1912, so it is very unlikely he would have learnt of the replacement.

In 1945 this second TS Exmouth was taken over by the Thames Nautical School as a replacement for their training ship the Worcester. This was another old wooden walled warship that had reached the end of its useful life and was moored next to the Arethusa at Greenhithe. The ship was extensively refurbished, and in 1953 when Grandad showed me the pictures of the training ships he kept in the old biscuit tin, he was probably innocently unaware it was not a picture of the old original Exmouth he had been on. The replica looked just like the original Exmouth, and was very similar in appearance and size to the Victory that is kept at Portsmouth. There was quite a bit of publicity in the press at the time of the recommissioning and he may well have become somewhat sentimental when he saw the pictures of her. Maybe, despite the unhappy memories, that was why he had saved the pictures. Who can tell?

It must have been a tremendous change for him when he joined the Exmouth. Previously he had plenty of freedom to do much as he pleased while his widowed mother spent most of her time at work away from home. He once told me he frequently played hooky from school and he and his little brother spent much of their time playing in Kings Cross Station or cruising the Circle Line underground system all day. I suspect Kate's children were a pretty wild bunch of street arabs.

There are a number of records describing the conditions under which the children were trained at these nautical schools. It was a grindingly boring mindless system of long hours, hard work, little food, and strict authority with strong religious and moralistic influences: all good material for a Dickens' novel of drudgery and misery. Some of the ships, such as the Mercury and the Indefatigable, had reputations for institutionalised bullying and excessive cruelty from the instructors who were usually ex-Navy petty officers. Even worse, some of the petty officers sexually abused young inmates. A story by an ex 'Indy" boy is revealing. The boys were broken up into "watches", as on a normal ship, and each watch was under the control of a petty officer. Some of these officers formed attachment with a "favourite", who would act as "prefect" for the petty officer. The prefect was usually a bully who bashed up new recruits whilst "showing them the ropes", after they joined the ship. The various petty officers would also be in responsible for inter watch competition, which often took the form of boxing tournaments. Each petty officer treated his "favourite" much as a greyhound owner would treat his dog, - feeding it well, exercising it, and betting on it. And just like a dog that couldn't win races, the unfortunate boy suffered a similar fate if his performance as a boxer or a "companion" was found lacking.

Grandad gave me several stories about his time on the Exmouth, but never showed any bitterness. I think he thought the Exmouth no better or worse than others experienced elsewhere, and he just accepted things for what they were. He said they gave him a good education but were very strict. The emphasis was on the three R's - reading, writing and arithmetic. He must have been an intelligent child who could have done who knows what with his life with the right opportunities. He had nice handwriting, typical of the late Victorian period, and could compose a letter free of grammatical or spelling errors. He liked reading when he was retired, albeit a preference for Zane Grey westerns, which may have been a touch of nostalgia harking back to his early years in America. He was also adept at basic arithmetic, and could quickly tell if a shopkeeper had diddled him in his change.

He mentioned little things over the years that I've gradually remembered whilst I've been writing about him. Once he told me how his education had heavy emphasis on Britain's naval tradition and he had to know all the details of Nelson's sea battles and that sort of thing. If the answer was not correct, he was wrapped over the knuckles with a cane. "Keep your hands on the desk top when I ask you a question", the teacher would say. Whack! "Wrong answer; stay back after class and write 50 lines on your slate: The Battle of Trafalgar, 1805."

He told me that the worst bullying person he was taught by was the chaplain who gave religious instruction. Maybe that had something to do with his poor opinion of the church.

He also mentioned that they sometimes had visits by "toffs". When I asked him what a toff was, he said airily, "Oh, important people. People with titles or letters after their names. Sometimes we would be standing for hours barefooted on the deck in our best blues waiting for them to arrive, and then they'd just look at us and in a couple of minutes they'd be gone. But we didn't mind the waiting. They gave us an apple or a bit of cake on those days."

I suppose I was a bit sceptical of this and suspected he was making out that things were tougher than they really were. But I have since obtained a copy of the meals and rations menu for boys at that time. It makes for sober reading, and confirms other reports I've read, that deliberate underfeeding was a commonplace practice at the time. General belief was that full stomachs made for independence of spirit and insubordination.

Each year certain boys who had homes to go to and were not wards of the Parish, were allowed a holiday period to visit their family. It would seem that Grandad was officially a ward of the Parish. If a parent allowed adoption of the child as a ward of the Parish, the Clerk to the Guardians had complete control and discretion over that child until it reached the age of 18. It was an extension of the Workhouse system, and in fact the Metropolitan Asylums Board, who operated the Exmouth, still ran Workhouses in London until they were amalgamated into the newly formed London County Council in 1905. It is a shocking thought to realise that my Grandad, who I loved so much, started out his life in such terrible circumstances.

For some reason, when Grandad was about 13, he was refused leave to visit his Mother. Clearly it was an extremely distressing situation. It would seem that as Kate, his mother, had made no contribution towards his maintenance at the ship, he was designated a pauper. A Mr. Wright, presumably the Clerk of the Guardians, told her that under these circumstances he would not be allowed further contact with her. An undated letter from Kate is on file at the M.A.B. Archives. It was sent to the Superintendent of the Exmouth, Captain Bouchier, and in it she requests the discharge of Grandad from the ship. Although no record of a reply has yet been found, permission was obviously not granted as he remained on the ship for a further eighteen months or so.

Clearly, as can be seen from the following Kate was of limited education, but must have been a woman of great personal independence of spirit to bring up five children on her own, and so spiritedly tell the authorities that "her son was no pauper."

LETTER IN M.A.B 2512/5742.

Re : Archie Painter, Reference 5742/152

(Copied from hand-written letter)

"2, Blackhorse Gardens,

Grays Inn Road.

I take the liberty of writing to ask you if you will kindly grant my son "Archie Painter" 152, disgarge. Last holidays Mr. Wright refused his leave and I have a comfortable clean home though I am alwhys at work from Monday till Saturday as cook in restaurant I am no pauper but in my ignorance I applied to the Parish to get my boy on the ship. Mr. Wright's idea is that I ought to pay for him but I have brought up a young family for eight years the eldest was only eleven and I never trouble the Parish for a penny and I don’t see why my boy should be called a pauper. Will you Sir, your kindness of which so many speak kindly let me know what I am to do to have my Son home. He has not bad record always being the best of boys for an answer I shall be truly grateful.

I am Sir,

Yours most respectably,

Kate Painter.

Captain Bouchier."

Note: The above is a copy of a hand-written letter from Archie's mother, Kate Painter, as found in the M.A.B. files. The following are comments received from the Exmouth Association Archivist, Patrick Jones:

"Mr. Wright, was, presumably, the Clerk to the Guardians. Once the Parish or Union had 'adopted' a child they had complete control and discretion over that child until it reached the age of eighteen. In some instances they would not allow any contact between the parents, or other members of the family, and the boy. Letters either way were intercepted and sent to the Guardians if they required it. Captain Bouchier was indeed, an extremely kindly man but there is no record of a reply to Kate's letter. Admittedly, copies of replies were not always filed, but it is quite possible he may have taken the easy option and ignored it."

Patrick Jones, TS Exmouth Association Archive Collection, C/- 19 Markville Gardens, Caterham, Surrey, CR3 6RG.

I once asked Grandad what was his very first experience of sailing on a ship at sea and was surprised when he told me the following story:

"When I was about your age (it was at Beddington Road he told me and I would have been about 11 or so), I ran away and sailed around the coast in a Thames sailing barge. The barge was manned by just an old man and me and another boy about my age. We went from Gravesend to Harwich and up the Thames to the Port of London. It was great fun." Recently I found that it was commonplace for Thames sailing barges to be manned by just a man and a boy, or a man and his wife.

Grandad told me all about how they had to raise and lower the leeboards on the barge when they tacked her, and all about how you had to avoid the Goodwin Sands and other navigation hazards around the estuary mouth. He told me how he never dreamt that one-day the sailing barges (which were extremely common in those days) would all gone and only occasionally used as pleasure boats. When I was very young I once went with Nan and Grandad to Clacton and Grandad got quite excited when he pointed out a sailing barge to me. She looked quite elegant out at sea, the wind filling the rust coloured sails as she slowly sailed along the coastline. She didn't look at all like the dirty old things kept moored near the Tower of London.

I got the impression he enjoyed the experience of sailing. Having had a yacht of my own I can imagine a young boy's exhilaration of spirit when sailing in the open sea for the first time. There is nothing quite like the feeling of freedom as a fresh wind and the sea spray stings your face, and the sails crack when the wind shifts as the craft beats her way into a stiff breeze in a choppy sea. I must have enjoyed his yarn, because only now do I realise that I never asked him why he ran away to sea on a sailing barge.

I remember another incident which makes me think that Grandad enjoyed sailing. When I was about 16 I had my own little bedroom at Eccleston Crescent. The room was only about 6' by 8' - just enough room for a single bed and a small desk for me to study at. I'd spend Saturday mornings lying on the bed, reading a book and listening to "pick of the pops" on my very own radio. One morning Grandad poked his head round the door and said, "What have you been up to since I last saw you?"

"Working out how I'm going to make my own sailing dinghy," I replied.

He came into the room and sat down on the end of the bed.

"And how do you plan to do that?" he asked with a smile.

"I've been reading a book about how you can do it. It's not hard you know. I've already drawn up the plans." I nodded towards the book and my "plans", which were sitting on the desk with all the heaps of other books and junk I kept there. He picked them up and started studying them. He took his time. Most other adults would have laughed and said I was foolish, but Grandad was never like that with me. The book described how the author, as a teenager, had made a 12' pram dinghy from plywood and taught himself how to sail on the Thames.

Presently he put them down and lit a cigarette. I could see his mind was working overtime and he was interested in my project.

"Mmm, well I suppose you could do it if you really wanted to, but why go to all that trouble when I could get you a real boat for less than all that stuff will cost you? And besides," he added as an after thought, "It's not much fun sitting in one of those matchboxes, with a wet arse, waiting for the first puff of real wind to blow you over into the drink."

He gave me one of his special winks and he had me hooked, the old devil. Soon it was our project, but I didn't mind. Grandad explained that he knew where he could get a really nice little lifeboat for only 10 pounds. "On second thoughts, I reckon I could get a fully equipped one, complete with oars, sails, kedge, and life jackets for about twenty," he mused.

"But a ships lifeboat, that's too big. And where would we keep it?" I asked.

"Oh I'm not talking about a normal lifeboat, often they put a little eighteen footer on a ship. Eighteen foot for a sailboat is small. I've rowed bigger boats than that on my own."

I was not convinced. "But where would we keep it? Mum wouldn't let me keep a lifeboat here."

"Oh Lord, we wouldn't keep it here." He took a few more puffs on his cigarette as he considered the problem. Then he slapped his knee and smiled. "I know just the place. It's down near Benfleet. Someone I know will let us keep it there for nothing. We can catch the train down whenever we want to do some work on her, or take her for a sail."

"But I don't even know how to sail a little dinghy, let alone a big eighteen foot lifeboat." I gasped. The situation was developing faster than my thoughts could keep track.

"Well isn't that the whole point. I'm going to teach you. Lord, anyone can learn to sail a little lifeboat. Don't you worry about that.”

At that point, just as Grandad's enthusiasm for the project had completely won me over, my Mum poked her head round the door with some tea and biscuits for us. "What have you two been talking about? You've been nattering away for the last half hour?"

"Grandad and me are getting a sailing boat, and he's going to teach me how to sail," I replied excitedly without thinking.

I swear she nearly dropped the tray in shock. "Oh no. Oh no, I'm not letting you go sailing at your age. It's much too dangerous." She was extremely agitated and it was if someone had thrown a bucket of cold water over Grandad and me. We looked at each other with disappointment, and then Grandad sighed and raised his eyebrows in resignation. I could see that he wanted to say something, but he kept his peace.

"Oh well, maybe your Mum's right Mike, maybe we can talk about it again in a year or two." But I could sense that the subject was closed.

My Mum was without fault as a parent, but she was inclined to be always worrying about things that might happen. She couldn't face taking a risk just for the fun of it. Who knows what would have happened if she'd let Grandad take me sailing. I can't help feeling it would have been a wonderful experience.

When I read the letter Grandad's mother sent to Captain Bouchier at the Exmouth, I feel sure it was after being refused leave that he absconded. The Exmouth was moored at Grays, close to Gravesend, so it would not have been too hard for him to make his way there by foot. And anyway, it was nothing exceptional that he did. Absconding was commonplace with the boys when they got the chance, and was usually committed out of desperation rather than intransigence. Indeed, conditions of bullying and public humiliation were so commonplace that some of the boy cadets of more fragile temperament ended up drowning or hanging themselves!

If my interpretation of the circumstances of his running away are correct, he must have either voluntarily or compulsorily returned to the Exmouth at some stage after his adventure. We know that he completed his training and was discharged to the steam ship Cayo Romano in 1897, bound for Bermuda as a deck boy on a pay rate of 10/- per month. Probably he ran away because he was home sick and just wanted to see him Mum; he was only a small boy of 13. Captain Bouchier, who, fortunately, was reported to be a 'kindly man' with a genuine sense of care for his wards (which was certainly the exception rather than the rule with other training ships), presumably took him back and did not put the incident on his school record.

When the Admiralty gave the Exmouth to M.A.B. on permanent loan, she came complete with masts, spars (no sails), and two cannons. On other training ships these guns sometimes served a sinister purpose. Boys that had to be made an example of, for misdeeds (such as absconding), were made to lie stomach down over the barrel of the cannon and be secured so they could not move. They then received corporal punishment. By the turn of the century they had dispensed with the 'cat o nine tails' employed earlier, but the birch was still used, and this was almost as painful and could cause laceration of the skin. The practice was continued until well into the 1920's. I really hope that my Grandad did not suffer such a humiliation. However, whatever the outcome, little wonder that when he got the chance, he spent his late teenage years and twenties in the Far East and in America, and it was not until the equally traumatic 'Peter the Painter' incident in America that he finally returned to England.