

LITTLE SHIP, BIG STORY

Conrad Press

ISBN 978-1-911546-46-7

Review by Michael Forbes Smith

Past Commodore of the Little Ship Club

“This is indeed a “Big Story” – at 459 pages it is also long, but endlessly fascinating. To review a book for “Little Ship” written by a distinguished Little Ship Club member could be a task requiring much tact and diplomacy. Thankfully none is needed for Rodney Pell has penned an engrossing story which astonishes both by the depth of his research and the verve and evident pleasure with which he writes. In essence this is a collection of “ripping yarns”, occasionally in almost Edwardian prose: lively, exciting, occasionally poignant, woven like a stout long splice around the 85-year history of the 25-ton motor yacht “Sheemaun”. Though a “fictionalised” account, doubtless with some poetic licence here and there, it is firmly based on a mass of diaries, letters and other sources painstakingly acquired over many years. It is not only the story of “Sheemaun” and her 15 owners (and one crew member in particular) but of their worlds: a social and cultural history of life around the Thames Estuary and South Coast throughout the 20th Century.

Beginning in the depressed aftermath of the First World War, we move to Glasgow where “Sheemaun” was designed and Fraserburgh where she was built by Noble’s boatyard, a change from fishing boats: coming from the North East of Scotland himself, your reviewer can vouch for the picture the author paints so touchingly. We then enter the world of the gentleman’s motor yacht with a hired hand to crew “Sheemaun” on her 1935 maiden voyage. Through the deprivations of the war-time East End and the defence of the River Thames, the post-war glories and demise of a luxury South coast hotel (complete with spy story), to a life in a 1950’s public school. The 7/7/2005 London

bombings, in which Pell's daughter Suzie had a very narrow escape, strikes a sombre note very personal to the author before he recounts "Sheemaun's" last few decades as a distinguished and much decorated old lady.

The "Little Ship" of the title is also rather daring, though a small ship "Sheemaun" indisputably is. The Little Ship Club predates the "Little Ships" of the Dunkirk evacuation by some 14 years. (one of only two errors your reviewer found was the story of the award of the Little Ship Club's defaced ensign: Lord Chatfield, not Duff Cooper, was First Sea Lord at the time). "Sheemaun" was at that moment "virtually a privateer ... [informally part of] the Royal Navy Thames Auxiliary Patrol Service" and could not be spared from her important duties, including "highly dangerous anti-mine activities", though her two meetings with "Sundowner" (one of the little ships captained by then Little Ship Club member Captain Charles Lightoller) are duly recorded. She remained at her post, first voluntarily and subsequently requisitioned, throughout the Second World War. Amongst the many pearls in this book, the vivid accounts of "Sheemaun's" war-time engineer, cockney Stanley Dodd RNVR, ranks high; how the family adjusted to the war-time City of London and the Blitz; how he and his new wife's Channel Islands holiday almost ended in German internment – they escaped on the last ship to leave, being shelled en route - ; why there were syphilitic rabbits in Whitechapel and how Stanley's sons returned to "Sheemaun" in 2013.

The war-time exploits of some of "Sheemaun's" future owners are recounted with gusto. Rear Admiral 'Peter' Gray was present at the Japanese bombing of Shanghai in 1937 and later, as First Officer on HMS Stork depth-charged and rammed a U-boat, before boarding her to seize her papers and winning a DSC (the U-boat's captain and first officer both committed suicide). Acting Lieutenant Ingram Ord Capper paid for the US lend-leased corvette HMS Kilchrenen with his own personal cheque. Thomas Burton's Lancaster bombing raids on Germany take us

in atmospheric prose to a quite different theatre of war. Amongst the less personal, but equally arresting stories is the account of the sinking of the explosive-filled SS Richard Montgomery in the Medway.

This is a book equally at home by the armchair and open fire with a glass or two in hand, or on the bed-side table. Either way, you will not be disappointed.”

MFS December 2018

<https://littleshipclub.co.uk/book-reviews>

Review by Nigel West – Intelligence Historian

“A fascinating account” September 2018

Review by D H Lee –

“I was privileged to get hold of a first edition and how lucky I was. This is a well-researched passage through maritime history, through the life of a traditional gentleman’s motor yacht. From her build in Scotland, through cruising the Flemish coast under the dark clouds of World War 2, her service in the Royal Navy as an armed motor yacht and peaceful but highly interesting adventures to the present day. One could say ‘from compass and DR to the satellites now above.’ The use of timelines at the end of chapters brings everything into perspective. A good book for sailors to read around a fire when weather bound and it’s blowing a hooligan outside.”

<HTTPS://www.ebay.co.uk/itm/FIRST-EDITION-book-Little-Ship-Big-Story-signed-Boat-Martime-Naval-History/401634349097?hash=item5d8345d029:g:jS0AAOSwOIlb6tNQ>

<https://www.eveningexpress.co.uk/fp/news/local/tales-of-high-seas-revealed-in-book-about-restored-boat/>

Tales of high seas revealed in book about restored 80-year-old boat.

By Lee McCann (Aberdeen)

Review by Robin Knight of Pangbourne College

“This is a most unusual book – one with a strong Pangbourne Flavour. Ostensibly it is about the adventures of HMY Sheemaun, a 24-ton 45 ft ‘Gentleman’s Motor Yacht that was launched in 1935 at Fraserburgh on the west coast of Scotland. Over 459 pages and 74 short chapters the ups and downs of this little boat and its 14 varied owners during the past 85 years are woven into a compelling single narrative. As a result, the reader is informed about such diverse matters, a gunboat action on the Hangpui river near Shanghai in the 1920s, boat-building in Scotland in the 1930s, the hotel business in Dorset, the perils of flying a Lancaster bomber in World War II, naval convoy attacks, freezing dormitories at Cheltenham College prep school in the late 1940s and the 7/7 tube bombings in London in 2005.

From a Pangbourne perspective, there are three key figures in the book all of whom were owners of Sheemaun at one point or another. Ingram Capper (21-24) joined the British India Steam Ship Company from the NCP before becoming a stockbroker in 1928. During WWII he commanded HMS Cutty Sark, a submarine escort vessel, and HMS Kilchrenen, an American-built corvette that he purchased with a personal cheque (underwritten by the Admiralty) from a Chicago shipyard in 1943 and commanded to the end of the war. In 1952 Capper, a crack shot, was a member of the UK Olympic Games shooting team at Helsinki. Aged 52 he bought Sheemaun in 1959 and cruised the East coast in her to 1955.

Two years later Sheemaun was acquired by Rear Admiral G.T.S, 'Peter' Gray CB, DSC (25-28) who then sailed her for 14 happy years all over European waters. Gray had a very eventful WWII, initially serving in the heavily armed sloop HMS Stork and taking part in ferocious battles in the North and Arctic Seas, the Mediterranean and North Atlantic. Later he was given command of a Hunt-class destroyer HMS Badsworth and saw more action as part of the Murmansk convoys and off the coast of North Africa. Mentioned in Despatches five times, Gray won his DSC in 1941 having boarded a sinking U-boat, U-574, armed with only a pistol to collect any secret documents he could despite the considerable danger to himself.

In 1981 Lt. Cdr. Ian Pearson, then Executive Officer at Pangbourne College, purchased Sheemaun in order to train cadets at sea. Over the next five 'very good and active years' a motley collection of CCF pupils gained some real hands-on experience of navigation, boat handling and seamanship. Crewed by six cadets, Sheemaun went downstream from Pangbourne College (its base) to the tidal Thames Estuary, across the Channel and even, on one occasion, through the French canals to Paris. A dozen or more OPs are named in the book including Richard Forward (81-86), David Carr (79-86), Ruck Nightingale (82-86, Andrew Adams (79-84), Tudor Rose (85-89), Neil Ward (83-87), Mark Rowland (79-86), Timothy Erbe (79-84), Hugo Mahoney (83-88), James Morley (80-87), Nick Stephens (80-87), Alastair Farquhar (83-88), Graham Dawkins (83-87). James Minter (83-86, Alastair Doyne-Ditnos (8-87 and Ian Jameson (84-88).

In 1987 Ian Pearson became a housemaster of Harbinger and sold Sheemaun to Dr. Rodney Pell. A consultant surgeon fascinated by boats and the Thames Estuary, Pell has subsequently restored Sheemaun and skippered her on some memorable engagements. In 2010 Sheemaun was appointed Flagship of the National Historic Ships UK. More recently the

vessel took part in the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Grand Thames Pageant and prestigious festivals in Dunkirk and Ostend.

Sheemaun's most noteworthy role, though, was in the 1939-45 war. Requisitioned by the Admiralty, she became His Majesty's Yacht Sheemaun and, as such was one of the 20-Armed Auxiliary Patrol vessels based at Cliffe Fort in Essex.* Tasked with defending the Thames Estuary against magnetic mines and bombs and inspecting incoming vessels. Her duties also included delivering mail and cargo, rescuing downed British and German airmen and much else besides. Frequently machine-gunned by German aircraft in the 1941-43 period and threatened from time to time by raiding German E-boats, the role was never dull and often perilous. Yet Sheemaun and her crew survived unscathed.

The book has been comprehensively and lovingly researched over a number of years and little about Sheemaun's fascinating existence can have been omitted. It might have benefitted from a strong editor but, that said, it is an enjoyable read – one which will strike a chord with many Pangbournians.”

Robin Knight

*actually, Cliffe Fort is in Kent, on the Isle of Grain - RP

Mary Lord –

“My daughter gave me a copy, I've loved reading it, it's so interesting. The timelines make it all so real.”

24/04/19 – The book ‘Little Ship, Big Story’ has just been nominated for the prestigious Mountbatten Literary Award.

27/04/19

“I hope you will permit me to congratulate you on your marvellous book, which I much enjoyed. My brother-in-law recently sent me a copy I shall have no hesitation in recommending your book to friends.

I was particularly interested in your depiction of wartime life for those working on the Thames, for which you must have done very significant research. We have all read Anthony Beevor and Max Hastings for instruction on the great campaigns of WW2, but very few authors, other than you, have given us an account of the civilian/Hostilities Only side of things your story provided a salutary and most welcome lesson

Many congratulations again and very many thanks, a great read!”

Roger Hicks