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## The SIRC column

# Invisible seafarers, hidden ports

**Professor Tony Lane, director of the Seafarers' International Research Centre, goes to sea and suggests how things could be made easier for crews calling at small ports**



THE reality of ports in terms of the experiences they can make available for most seafarers for most of the time is pretty unremarkable. Several months ago I sailed for just twelve days aboard a small bulk carrier which mainly works the unglamorous trades of northern Europe where she shifts basic commodities – mostly stones and aggregates, wheat and barley, potash and animal feeds. Typically, she delivers and collects her cargoes in small ports or at obscure wharves in larger ports. I joined her in Newhaven on the UK's Channel coast where she was discharging aggregates. Four days earlier she had loaded in Llandulas which is no more than a jetty connected by a conveyor to a quarry on the North Wales coast of Liverpool Bay.

The ship was running low on provisions by the time she got to Newhaven so the old man and the cook went ashore together and came back in a taxi a couple of hours later. They admitted to having had a couple of beers but once twenty or so plastic bags had been dumped at the foot of the gangway it was pretty obvious that their run ashore had amounted to trawling the aisles of the local supermarket. The engineer went ashore too. Going alone, he was looking for a shop which he knew from a previous but distant visit sold second-hand computer bits and pieces. The business had moved to another town and our man was soon disappointedly back aboard. One of the ABs had also gone ashore. Dressed up and in search of a disco, he had found what he was looking for but was not to be drawn into detail. For a small ship like this one, temporarily parked in an economically depressed and insignificant estuarial port whose main industry seemed to be an enormous scrap-metal-eating machine, my new shipmates had enjoyed a pretty standard set of experiences. Although I'm still puzzled about where Ernesto had found whatever he found!

At noon the next day we sailed in ballast for Plymouth. Thanks to bad weather the 18-hour trip turned into a day and a half which gave us a 2 am Monday morning arrival. We got on to the berth at midday and loaded aggregates in a couple of hours in the evening. By eight o'clock we had sailed

for Cowes where we arrived on Tuesday, early afternoon. No one had gone ashore in Plymouth. The ship was at the head of a creek a long way from the city. The bus services were poor, it was a working day and more than half the crew of seven hoped to catch up on lost sleep.

Cowes could have been my home port. I had once lived in the Isle of Wight and wasn't my first mate's ticket issued at the Cowes Mercantile Marine Office? So naturally the younger members of the crew wanted my opinion of the town's suitability for seafarers. Going up river they had cast an eye over the place and hadn't seen the signs. They were ready for my verdict that a "good run ashore" in February was improbable.

But was there a Mission or a seafarers' club where they could make a cheap phone call home, or somewhere to buy a cheap phone card, pick up some magazines, swap, trade in or buy cheap videos? They didn't expect to find a Mission in such a small place and they weren't too surprised when I doubted their chances with phone cards etc.

This well cared for, pretty little ship of 2500 dwt had an international crew. The master was a UK-resident Qatari and the mate was Croatian; the engineer was British and his assistant was Polish. The cook was Romanian and so also was one of the two ABs. The other AB was a Cape Verdean. A crew of seven with six nationalities. Everything about the ship was a credit to them, including their camaraderie ashore. I went off with the old man and the mate to find them a supermarket and hopefully the much-prized cheap phone card. There were none to be had in the empty and poorly-stocked shop. I took them to the Harbour Lights which can take several hundred people. On this night there were seven, including we three. We talked ships and ports and families as the "rules" require, bought a round each and set off back to the ship, only to bump into the cook and the intrepid Cape Verdean AB, Ernesto. So it was into another pub (a lot busier) and the old man stood treat. More talk but this time focused on a bright yellow jacket our bursting-with-life Romanian cook had had made for him in Madras, but had subsequently traded for goods

in kind in a Nicaraguan port. A lot of laughs and leg-pulling as we made our way to the takeaway kebab house across the street run by a Bangladeshi father and son. It's a crisp stary night as we make our way back through confusing Cowes back streets chewing our way through several times reheated chunks of lamb, limp lettuce and tasteless tomatoes wrapped in pitta bread. A pretty typical night ashore. Twenty-four hours later we are coming up to Dungeness, on our way to Rotterdam for a cargo of fluorspar to take to Ellesmere Port on the Manchester Ship Canal.

Rotterdam is for us a case of being near and yet so far. For three hours we sit alongside a quay only a stone's throw from

two hours late for the tide to get us upriver. So we will be going up on tonight's tide and the credit balance on the sleep account, built up on the passage from Rotterdam and the day at anchor, will surely go back into deficit tonight. It does. There's a queue of five small ships idling in the channel waiting to lock in to the ship canal and it's gone midnight as we go through – to find fog which means we must tie up at lay-by berths for the night. All five of us. The air is dead still and there are five generators shattering the night. It's a relief to turn-to at 5.30 am to go alongside at Ellesmere Port where it's time for me to sign off and get to Chester for a train to Cardiff.

On the way home my mind



Shipmates waiting for the tide at the Mersey Bar (Photo: SIRC Photographic Archive)

the bright lights of the city centre. Fifty yards away in one direction there's a pub and fifty yards the other way a metro station, a gateway to anywhere in the city. But there's no shore leave. We are waiting to move out into midstream where we will go alongside a big Chinese bulker to take some of her cargo which she has brought in from a Turkish Black Sea port. There is no disappointment. There will not be much sleep for anyone this night as we shift berths, load in a matter of several hours and then sail immediately. Sure enough the pattern of events turns out as predicted even if the "timetable" is predictably inaccurate. Everyone moans about the disruptions during the night, especially the old man, even if he is familiar with the unpredictable arrivals and departures of agents, draught surveyors, customs and port officials. After a day without proper sleep he still has to be on the bridge as we sail at 6 am and then keep his watch until noon.

We have run into one of those patches of anticyclonic, spring-like weather that February occasionally serves up. It's a lovely trip down Channel, round the corner and up into the Irish Sea. Unhappily we arrive off the Mersey Bar

is clambering over the piles of observations of the past twelve days. Coming through the vessel traffic separation lanes of the Dover Straits I hear the Coastguard talking to the ships reporting in. I am struck by the number of small ships, the accents of the masters, the cargoes carried, their ports of departure and destination, the number of people aboard: ships like mine with crews like mine calling at ports like mine; the simple needs sought in the goings ashore in Newhaven and Cowes and all the other places my shipmates would be visiting on subsequent trips; the hours worked by the crew; the lengths of their contracts – nine months for the Romanians; remittances to families and the costs of maintaining contact by phone; and then, overwhelmingly, how easy it ought to be to make things easier for crews calling at hidden ports.

A few signposts showing how to get away from the wharf, leaflets with maps of the locality, written in simple English in acknowledgement of the normality of mixed nationality crews, and telling how to find a phone, a taxi, the supermarket, phone cards, videos, and not forgetting a sympathetic listener/advisor. It's not a lot but it would make a difference.