

THV PATRICIA – West Coast voyage

A light-hearted account by Bryan Thwaites
of a week on board
this Trinity House Vessel
9th – 16th September 2015

PREAMBLE

We – that is Ros and I – launched ourselves on this expedition on a whim. To be more precise, on a whim of mine. At a lunch in February our good friend Consie told us that she and Mark were going for a week on board Patricia. I had never heard of the ship nor of the possibility of joining her, but in view of my wonderful experience of a circumnavigation on the container ship CP ROME ten years ago I at once Googled Trinity House to learn more.

The details were very tempting. Just six passenger cabins with their own separate accommodation and with their own chef, waiter and steward. The cabins were all of different sizes (and prices). We having been thoroughly spoilt by having had Owners' Suites on Fred Olsen cruise liners, I thought we should have the best cabin.

So by telephone I found a week for which Stateroom One was free and reserved it on the spot without consulting Ros, to whom I then said: "it would be so lovely if you would come as well, but either way I am footing the whole bill so that you do not feel under any pressure". And that remained the mutual position to within a week or so of my departure when Ros finally decided that she was definitely coming (and, typically, insisted on paying her whack).

Unlike cruise liners which ply to a strict itinerary, Patricia goes where it is needed to service buoys and light-houses on a regular basis, to deal with unexpected malfunctions and also to maintain light-houses. Thus although her 6-month passenger season is divided up into weekly periods and a probable port of departure for each is published, there can be no guarantee that the programme will be adhered to and it is a condition for passengers that they accept the possibility of last-minute changes.

Indeed, that was the case with us. We had been expecting to depart, and hopefully return, to Harwich. But in mid-August we were told that Swansea would be our port of departure (and hopefully of return). So travel plans were duly revised. Then at about 10.00hrs on the 15th September on board we were told that a major buoy off Anglesey was malfunctioning and that we were now bound for North Wales. This meant an extra day and disembarkation at Holyhead. Such was our pleasure at that prospect that all of us passengers welcomed the change to the amazement of the Captain who had clearly expected a mutiny! But then, anti-climax – within a mere half-hour, we were back to Swansea again – a remarkable volte-face which suggested some vacillation in the decision-making within Trinity House.

Final embarkation details are sent out 12 days before, with a considerable amount of information including the names of all the passengers. In our case there were five other singletons – three men friends who had travelled together, one American chap and a lady who had been on Patricia several times before. The obvious pre-question was: how well would we gel? In the event, the answer was: remarkably well, which was due in part to the kernel of three friends and in part to the American providing a constant source of Anglo-American discussion which was often very spirited (e.g. on the subject of gun laws and the police) but never offensive.

EMBARKATION

Swansea is not the easiest of places to reach from Chichester – and neither of us had been there before. I ruled out driving there, partly because of the distance and partly because the idea of leaving the car in a working dock was not very attractive. So train was the answer and, as it turned out, unexpectedly easy and attractive. Chichester to Southampton, Southampton to Newport, and Newport to Swansea, the two changes being very quick and easy from the same platforms. With our Senior Citizen Railcards, pretty reasonable too at about £54 return. But in total some five and a half hours which made it unrealistic to travel on the day of embarkation (the 9th). So we decided to spend the night at a hotel in Swansea on the 8th.

Eschewing the usual hotel chains, I chanced upon a B&B by the name of the Mirador Boutique hotel which turned out to be pretty remarkable. An ordinary 1910-ish terrace house each of whose rooms had been decorated and furnished in the most extravagantly bizarre fashion. In particular, some of its walls were covered in what looked like painted murals but which in fact were huge prints of computer-generated designs. So it appears that it is easy nowadays to design one's own wall-paper.

We went out to supper at a local restaurant and ordered its speciality – duck, my favourite. After 40 minutes still no duck. In the light of the consequence which was a nasty-ish bout of food poisoning for me, we concluded that they had had to go out and shoot the duck first.

So the next morning saw us doing a bit of shopping and Ros having an impromptu hair trim for £2.50. Then a taxi to reach the ship at the appointed time of 2.30 p.m.

Within the hour we were being shown round the ship, in particular the parts which were out of bounds to passengers but more importantly the passenger accommodation. This turned out to be far more spacious and splendid than the blurbs had suggested – and the reason eventually emerged: it had been designed originally for Elder Brethren of Trinity House, as Inspectors, to stay on board for weeks at a time. Thus across the back of the ship is a beautiful dining room with a huge polished table made of a single piece of wood (mahogany?). Above it on the next deck is an equally beautiful drawing room approached by an impressively wide carpeted staircase. And from them a wide corridor leads to the six staterooms.

Our own stateroom, the biggest, was delightful with desk, sofa, chair, coffee table, fridge and mini-bar, a big ward-robe and oodles of drawers. The bathroom was true to its name – with a fine bath and enough hand-holds to enable this Old Boy to get out by himself (well - a little help was always welcome). But there was the inevitable BUT..... the bed was only 4ft 6in wide, nowhere near the double beds now standard in good hotels. Many couples would surely find this a severe disadvantage, and I think the blurb should include a warning about it. Presumably, the Elder Brethren were all single.

PERSONNEL

There were three people central to the passengers' well-being. Tony the chef (and boss of the other two) was a big mid-50s Welshman who had served on board Patricia for donkey's years. He prepared food entirely to his own liking. He knows numerous small suppliers all round the UK and through them buys only the best. A real enthusiast, he is clearly in his element, having total control of the menus for up to 12 people at a time. His preparation of vegetables was quite outstanding for its consistency; and there was one main course of chicken which was, I do declare, the finest I have ever been offered – quite an accolade! Then there was Les of similar age who was the “Mess Steward” responsible for setting the table and serving the food. Also long-serving on Patricia, he had once been a steward on the Royal Yacht and that experience was all too evident in his immaculate and discreet behaviour around the table. One of his (many) abilities was in creating “napkin-sculptures” - a different one for each dinner. Particularly memorable were a 4-master yacht, a GI's cap and a Cardinal's mitre. Third came Dan(iel), the “Cabin Steward”, a most engaging character who, among other things, takes roles in Fawlty-Towers-type productions in his home town of Portsmouth. His main responsibility was to maintain to a very high standard the six passenger cabins; but he doubled as the server of pre-dinner drinks and assistant to Les round the table.

As an aside, Les provided an example of the random relationships which seem to crop up all the time. He was chatting to me about serving in Trinity House itself and happened to mention that his favourite Admiral was one Jeremy de Halpert whose brother Simon I know very well!

The only other crew with whom we had any kind of regular contact was the Captain (and his successor – see below) but all other occasional contacts were extremely casual and friendly.

FOOD

- 8.30 Breakfast. No menu – you have whatever you wanted.
- 11.0 Elevenses in the Lounge.
- 1.0 Lunch. This consisted of soup (always delicious) and a smallish main course; no more. Only water served; wine at your own expense but I don't remember any alcohol at lunch. (I myself had brought my own gin and vermouth for my standard noon pick-me-up.)

- 4.0 Tea and cake/biscuits.
- 7.0 Pre-dinner drinks in the Lounge.
- 7.30 Dinner. 4 courses, one of which was a multi-cheese-board. Fine wines. Coffee.

ACTIVITY

During my circumnavigation I kept a full-blown daily diary covering 86 days of hugely varying experience which I had printed and published. On Patricia, I did not keep a daily record, partly because it was only a week and partly because there seemed so little to report. So what now follows are just a few recollections.

At 4.30 on the day of embarkation, after we had settled in to our cabins, the Chief Officer took us round the ship. All the usual things but with emphasis on what were out of bounds. Thus the big foredeck on which the hoisted buoys were dumped and serviced was clearly forbidden territory as was any space elsewhere in which crew were operating. The Bridge was open to us except when, again, there was specific activity such as entering or leaving port with a pilot. Similarly the Engine Room for which, one day, we were given an extensive and detailed tour.

As to the Engine Room I am familiar with most of the goings-on and so was surprised that Patricia does not have its own water-making plant. Instead it has fresh-water tanks large enough to cope with water use (including baths) for 2 or 3 weeks at a time. The ship operates essentially coastally and so is always within easy reach of a port. But another interesting point arose. For 'ealth-'n-safety reasons, ships take on sea-water for purification only when they are far from land.

And as to power, Patricia has 2 main diesel-electric motors and three back-ups of various sizes. Propulsion is therefore by electric motors. Voltages are either 400 or 600. The greatest swallower of power is the bow-thruster unit (on my container ship, its ammeter was rated up to 5,000 amps at 400 volts!!!).

Towards the end of the Chief Officer's introduction he told us that the Captain, Nick Wright, was not on board but at a management meeting at the Harwich HQ and that he would not be back until the next day. Therefore we would not be going out to sea until then. Meanwhile however, we would be given a shore trip by taxi to a local lighthouse. So on the 10th we all spent several hours admiring the Welsh countryside, being shown round a light-house (very interesting) and partaking of Tesco-style sandwiches at a wind-swept picnic. Such a loss of a full day was due not, in my opinion, to the exigencies of the service but to an administrative arrangement long-planned. A ship without a Captain is not a ship. So on our return I wrote suggesting a token refund of £250 and indeed that was rapidly agreed with the acknowledgement that the passengers should have been informed of the arrangement beforehand.

The Captain duly arrived on the 10th and we set sail at about 4.30 p.m. through the lock of the Swansea docks. He had been with Trinity House for many years and was in the process of being promoted to a shore job at HQ.

The excitement on the next day, the 11th, was the arrival of a helicopter which was to carry supplies of water and fuel to a nearby light-house which was being given a big service which involved engineers living in it for a few days (all light-houses are now unmanned and totally automated). The landing and take-off of the helicopter was carried out with amazing speed and efficiency with every member of a team of some seven crewmen knowing exactly what his responsibility was.

But the surprise was that the initial arrival of the helicopter produced the Captain who was to succeed Captain Wright. He looked such a young man as he stripped off his flying gear, and his whole demeanour was wholly informal. Later, when I had the chance to talk to him, it turned out that he was in his 30s with a young family and that he held a Master's ticket which would enable him to take charge of the QM2. All the officers, by the way, are officers in the Merchant Navy, not, of course, of the Royal Navy.

I should mention that Trinity House has a huge responsibility for the training of Officers and there were a few Cadets on board Patricia as a part of their course. On one occasion we watched one of them cleaning a buoy for the first time – it was so obvious that he was a tyro: but then, he would learn very quickly.

So by the 12th we were ready to go about our job, that is of coming alongside buoys, hoisting them onto the ship, doing whatever is necessary and then dumping them overboard again. As part of that process, the sinkers - the heavy blocks to which they are chained and which lie on the sea-bed - are also examined as are the chains and shackles.

It is a process which went very smoothly in the remaining days, partly due to the smooth seas we had. Only on one day did a sudden storm blow up from the SW and for about 3 hours produce some fairly rough conditions.

Where did we go? In a very small area of the Bristol Channel between the south coast of Wales around Swansea and the north coast of Somerset around Minehead. And in the whole time the total number of buoys serviced was about seven (I didn't keep a detailed count). Shall we say, on average one a day! I find that extraordinary, bearing in mind that there are hundreds of buoys all around the British Isles. So the cost per buoy must have been in five figures. However, one crewman told me that last year they had made a record with seventeen in a single day! - almost as remarkable as a mere one!

So, with so little apparently going on, what did one do? Well, it is one of the mysteries of the sea that time seems to pass imperceptibly with unusual pastimes which include just watching the sea. Thus two of the passengers completed a fiendish 1000-piece jigsaw of the Scilly Isles; Ros darned some holes in one of my pullovers and did quite a bit for Fitton; and I did a lot of the deadly 60-minute Killer SuDokus. All very harmless and enjoyable.

The final day was, for us, a masterpiece of planning. Four things had to be done: (1) the train journey from Swansea, but not to Chichester but to Bognor where (2) my car was hopefully ready after a new gear-box had been fitted by my lovely small garage there, and (3) Ros's car was also to be picked up at a Felpham coach-maker who was repairing various scratches and dents, and then (4) back to Chichester station to pick up Ros's brother Rodney, over here from his home in Barbados for a fortnight or so, who was catching the 3.31 from Victoria. Incredibly, it all worked as thus planned – left the ship at 9.45 a.m. and back home, all done, by 5.30 p.m.!

POSTLUDE

This has been a very sketchy account – but I don't think the week would justify anything more considered. But it will serve as a record for Ros and myself, and perhaps as an interest for such friends who may ever contemplate joining THV Patricia themselves. Neither of us have the slightest regret – quite the opposite, for it reminded us once again of the dedication, skill and professionalism of those who maintain the safety of the seas upon which our island nation depends.

BT.

22 September 2015.

www.wildwings.co.uk