

**Captain Peter Simpson – Scarborough – Merchant Navy Master Mariner****Interviewed and transcribed by Huw Roberts – December 2023**

Today I'm talking to Captain Peter Simpson. Born and bred in Scarborough, Peter was taught his seamanship at the Graham Sea Training School in Scarborough and from there served a long and distinguished maritime career including, would you believe, a lengthy period involved in shipbuilding, which I certainly want to know more about.

*Firstly Peter, please tell me how you, at the young age of 16 and with no history of seafaring in the family, you became a seaman.*

Well, as a young chap I was still at school at the Graham Sea Training School fast approaching my 16th birthday, at which time I hadn't quite made-up my mind what I wanted to do. I either wanted to go in the Merchant Navy and take up a training there in the form of an apprenticeship, a Deck Apprentice, and also I was considering going into the Royal Navy. However, things moved along fairly quickly and the headmaster of the school called me in one day into his study and he said, how would you like to go into the Merchant Navy as an apprentice. I said well that's probably the top answer on my list too, that's what I was going to consider doing. Then he said "Well, I've got in front of me an application form for a company called Ships Finance and Management Company", which was a London Greek outfit looking for cadets and apprentices who they could train up to operate and manage their ships." So I said, "Well, I would be quite happy to join them", not knowing anything about them; not really caring. I just wanted to get away to sea and get on with the start of my career. I was 16 years of age and I got a letter from them offering me a place on one of their ships as a cadet or as an apprentice as we were called in those days and, after signing my apprenticeship papers I signed on and I went to my first ship in June 1953 as an apprentice. I had to serve four years with this particular company to see how I got on. Then, at the end of that time my career would then be decided.

*So here you were, aged 16, with your apprenticeship under your belt on your first voyage to Syria, I believe in July 1953. Described what life was like for you for the early part of your career.*

A bit rough, and I don't mean the sea, I mean the conditions were a little bit rough. My first trip was an oil tanker I did not intend to go to sea on an oil tanker. I wanted to be on a cargo vessel for work, but this was the first opportunity for me to go and I accepted the appointment. When I say it was a bit rough, because I was an apprentice, I had to learn and learn fast. So you start at the bottom and you work your way up to the top and I was under the control of the bosun on deck who used to send me down into the bilges of the oil tank to clean out all the sludge, fill these buckets with the sludge, and then myself and the other apprentice used to haul these buckets up by hand, tip them into a larger barrel, and when these barrels were full we would roll them down the deck and store them until we got to a port where they would accept them as sludge. We never once threw them overboard into the sea I might add. They had to be disposed of in a proper and seamanlike condition. So this is how I started my career. I had thought that I was going to walk around in whites or a uniform all day long, but I spent most of my 24 hours a day in a boiler suit that was cleaned every day and made ready for the next job down the tanks.

*And where in those days were you travelling to in the world.*

It was on a backwards and forwards sort of routine. I started out, as you rightly pointed out, by going to Syria, a little place called Baniyas in Syria, which was an oil port, but it was an oil port insofar as we were anchored one mile offshore. You picked up connecting oil pipelines from the seabed. These were buoyed and marked. We put our stern towards the coast, then picked up the oil pipelines, secured them to the vessel as was required and then started to pump their oil into our tanks. This was out of my realm at that time. I was only a young fellow and I just did as I was told. I didn't have much of a clue as to what was actually going on. This is what it transpired I had to do most of the time when we were approaching ports.

*And how much time did you have ashore in between voyages?*

Well, in between voyages I did quite well. Initially, I used to get about five to six weeks between voyages, but a lot of the time, particularly on that first vessel I was on, which was called *Lord Canning*, the leave was limited. Even though you arrived back in the UK, you were not expected to be home for more than a week or ten days. In those days when I was a youngster I didn't care too much about that. I just wanted to get on with my apprenticeship so I was inclined to re-sign on the same vessel for a while.

Backwards and forwards, running to either Baniyas or further afield to the Persian Gulf. Mina Al Ahmadi where we again loaded the oil back for Europe. So we used to get to Europe, Europort, Hamburg, UK occasionally the Isle of Grain, places like that where there were storage facilities for oil.

*So in those early days with the signing on the same ship going backwards and forwards, I get the impression that there wasn't much time that you were able to spend with your family, how did you have time to develop a social life.*

Well, you make friends on board, of course. There was one seaman in particular who was a very experienced chappie from the islands of Scotland who took me under his wing and, in many ways and showed me the ropes and I used to follow him around and then, when we knocked off at the end of the working day, I would sit and we would talk about things seamanlike, and he would pass a lot of information on to me. It was quite interesting insofar as I think I learned an awful lot from this fellow. He's no longer with us, unfortunately now. At the start of my really digging deeper into a seafaring career, he introduced me to many other aspects of seafaring that were good for me in a future that I didn't foresee at that time. When I came ashore, and came home on leave, I used to go around with a bunch of lads backwards forwards into the pubs, out of the pubs and occasional other little things. It wasn't until much later that I met my wife. I was home on leave and it's going to be an amusing episode here, I went into a pub one night with my friends four or five of us. Some of them are still friends, and I went to sit down next to a couple who I didn't know, but there was a vacant seat there when I got my pint of beer. So I sat down next to this couple and started talking to them, and got to know them a little bit, and then suddenly this very elderly chap came into the pub, looked at me and said "That's my seat, your sitting in." and I immediately vacated the seat and sat elsewhere. After a week or so we were in the same pub. My pals and I and the same couple were in there. So I went over to say hello to them. It turned out that they were the mother and father of my future wife. I got talking to them and they said, oh, next time we'll bring our daughter who might like to have a chat with you. Her parents had gone home and told her that this seafaring chappie was wishing to meet her, which is not exactly true. I mean I just said yes, of course, if you bring your daughter I'll say hello to her. Next time we were there, she came to the pub and we got on from that moment and that was the start of a long and prosperous sort of agreement between us. I went away to sea and she stayed at home. It was good and bad because halfway through one particular voyage she said she no longer wanted to see me.

I was away too long and things would have to change a little bit and I said, being stubborn, I've made my career at sea and I really must follow that through. If at the end of the day you can't see your way clear to accept that, it looks like the parting of the ways. Anyway, we discussed it thoroughly, deeply, and we decided we would give it a bash. Here we are 50 years later, still together, so it must have been the right decision.

*But going back to sea then tell us how you progressed to being a master mariner and then taking charge of your first ship as captain.*

OK, I'll start at the very beginning and say that during the course of my four year apprenticeship, I'd like to think that I was showing signs of intelligence and advancement, learning as I went along and so I was taken on one of the cargo vessels that I served upon as an uncertificated third mate. Now, I couldn't break my apprenticeship. I was still only 18 or 19 years of age and I was given control of the watch keeping for the eight to twelve o'clock watch on the vessel, under the instructions of the master of the vessel. In other words, I was keeping watch, but he was doing the navigating and if anything ever showed up on the horizon or out at sea it would be his responsibility and not mine to do whatever was correct. But I was understudying him from that point on, so I spent two years of my apprenticeship doing this under studying. At the end of the time the best job that they could offer me, that particular company, the Ships Finance and Management Company, was a standby job as third officer on a laid up ship not knowing when the next employment would be. So I said, well, that's no use to me and I've got to look elsewhere. So my first thoughts were, I will get myself to college, and so I went to the Boulevard Nautical College in Hull where I did a lot of further training insofar as it was educational in getting my second mate's certificate. I got my second mate's certificate after six months of trying and went away to sea again, this time as a certificated officer and in charge of the eight to twelve watch. That went on for a couple of years and then I was back home again as a 24 year old, and I went again to Hull Boulevard Nautical College where I sat my Chief Officer's Certificate. Having achieved that, I thought, well, I will have to do something here, if I'm going to stay at sea. So meanwhile I'd applied to the Andrew Weir Shipping Company because after six months ashore at the end of an apprenticeship which wasn't paying any more than 10 shillings a month, I was in the position where I was hard up, extremely hard up. I'd borrowed some money and I had to pay that money back and so I went to sea where the shipping company was going to keep me away at sea for two years and give me a reasonable salary and give me an opportunity to make my way in life.

So I joined the Andrew Weir Shipping Company right away for a two year voyage and never came home in that two years. And at the end of the two years I said that I was prepared to stay on and do another two years. But they said no, we can't have that. If you're staying with us then what you should do is get yourself home at the end of this voyage, and get back to Boulevard Nautical College and get your Master's Certificate. When you've done that then come back to us and we will advance you. So that is exactly what happened and I went away to sea eventually as a Chief Officer and carried on until the day I was promoted as Master.

*I'm guessing over that time there were some good times, but also some difficult and sad times.*

Yes, the good times all came when I was younger, simply because I was experiencing life, I made friends with a lot of people on a my first Andrew Weir ship and this was a good grounding in effect. We used to go out as a gang together. Seafarers do have a tendency to do that. If you get three or four or five people together who are not on duty and have a bit of spare time, they all go out together. It's not from pub to pub as so many people seem to think, but this was taken up by going exploring around the town or city, often visiting churches, often visiting libraries which were very good places. There was always something on, and in particular, seafarers missions, which was called the 'Missions to Seamen'. There was always something going on at these places. They arranged dances, they arranged coffee mornings, they arranged for you to go there and make telephone calls home and all things like that. So everybody made their way there at some stage or another. And these places were to be found in just about most good sea ports around the world.

The bad times, unfortunately they do come along. Most of them for me happened a little later because of the fact that I was never involved in being a senior officer at that time. I was always one of the gang, shall we say. I had an unfortunate incident when I'd just got my first job as Chief Officer insofar as the Master died at sea and I had to take over the responsibilities of the Master as a 26 year old, not knowing an awful lot more than what had been taught ashore. Thrown in at the deep end, so to speak. The Master unfortunately had a heart attack in Madras. He was landed ashore and I was told the ship must go on and you will now be acting Master until you can be replaced. You will then go back to being Chief Officer, but for the moment, you are the Master. I had the qualifications. I didn't have the experience. That was one sad time.

Later in life when I was more experienced, I had the unfortunate experience of having a man fall down into the hold, a 30 foot drop from the deck to the bottom of the hold, which was empty at the time. He was involved in closing the hatch, and he slipped and fell. This was somewhere off South Australia and we had to pull into Perth, or rather Freemantle being the port for Perth. He died en route and we had to land his body ashore there. There was an inquest that I had to attend, and not very pleasant. Then after that I was involved in my first little venture of shipbuilding when I went to Belfast to join a ship called Nairn Bank that was completing its building. It was 3/4 of the way to being built by this time.

*And what was your role?*

My role was supervising various fitments that were going on board. As Chief Officer as I was then, I had to see that all the cargo spaces were properly decked out. That all the equipment was working on the bridge, that we were getting the quality of the goods that we'd ask for, things like that.

*And how many years were you involved in that?*

I was involved in that little bit of shipbuilding for about 8 months. I then went back to sea again and a couple of trips later we had an unfortunate incident. I was Chief Officer and we were had an incident in the South Pacific, where we ran aground on the way out port. We were coming out of a narrow channel and I think the master misjudged the turn in the channel and we struck the edge of a reef and started taking in water. I was very involved in trying to get that vessel off the reef. We had a cargo of pig iron at the time and after consultations with the Master, we decided we were going to have to dump some of this pig iron on the reef so that we lightened the ship and got her off. We rigged up what is known as a jury rig, it's not an official thing, but it worked for us, whereby we put the ships gear, the Derrickson beams and wire ropes to use and lifted these piggots of iron out of the hold with the winches and cranes, swung it over the side in a free flow swing. It then had a quick release mechanism while it was over the reef that let it go and this pig iron landed on the reef. We hauled the wires back on board re-wrapped around some more pig iron, lifted it up, swung it out, and on the outward swing again, the fixed section pulled out, released it all and let it fall into the sea. It work very efficiently. We had people who were higher than me examining this and they praised us for what we did. I think my name got a mention.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, when we got home at the end of that voyage I proposed to my wife and that's when we got married.

After that, the next best thing that happened to me was I got a call from the London office saying, would I go and relieve someone who is Acting Chief Officer who wanted to go home for his leave and then he would go back to sea in the same vessel, but would I give him a couple of days relief so that he could go home and enjoy his Christmas at home and then go back and join the vessel early in January. So I said yes, I would do that. However, when I got down to this vessel at Tilbury Docks, I was down there by nine or ten o'clock in the morning, I was sitting having a cup of coffee when one of the office wallers came rushing in and said "*You haven't signed your declaration of joining yet, have you?*" So I said, no, we were just having a quiet coffee and a talk about handing the ship over. So he said, "*Well, I've come straight from the London office. They want to see you in the London office.*" Usually when you get called into the London office, it is for a wrap of the knuckles for something you've done wrong. He said "*I can't tell you. I don't know what it's all about. All I've been told is to stop you signing on this vessel and grab you up.*" So I went up to the London office with him in his car from Tilbury. Up into the higher realms of the office in Bury St, London. I was confronted by this Senior Superintendent who said, well, you've done long enough as Chief Officer to know that there's a higher rank. I'm offering you a command of the vessel in the early New Year. Would you be prepared to take it? So I said yes, I would and we discussed pros and cons of that. And then I went home and it was me that got Christmas at home and not that poor fellow that was sitting waiting for me to take over from him. And that was the start of my command of 25 years of ships with Bank that went on until about 1994.

*When you took retirement after more than 40 years at sea.*

That's right.

*What were your thoughts at that time. What did you do in retirement?*

There were two things. By that time I had two young children, the boy and a girl and a wife to consider and I've been going away leaving these people to fend for themselves. The voyages were down to just five months by then. They weren't the two year voyages that I was doing when I was younger. However, I thought that I should spend more time with my wife and family and conditions were such that at 57 years of age

I was offered the opportunity to leave on 2/3 working salary at 57 years of age. Well, they don't come along very often and on top of that I would be getting my pension. So I said yes, I would take that. So they covered my 2/3 my salary from 57 to 60 when I would have been compulsory taking retirement anyway. I think what I can safely say is that my thoughts were with my family at that time. I wanted to leave. I built myself up to giving it up, and I never felt any remorse about it whatsoever. I still don't to this day. I think it was probably the best thing I could do. However, it didn't quite work out that way because I was asked again by the Banks Line if I would be kind enough to assist them insofar as when ships came back to the UK, would I relieve the Masters who were there and going back for a week so that they could get a week at home. I would take the ship around the UK coast and near continent and then they would rejoin again and I could go home and continue my retirement. I did that for three years. Then unfortunately, I had a mild heart attack and that mild heart attack meant that I had to have surgery. I had the surgery and I could not then be employed because of the fact that I was medically unfit.

*Captain Peter Simpson, it's been an honour to talk to you today. Thank you for telling me about what has been a distinguished, unique and exceptionally interesting career. Thank you.*

By Huw Roberts  
December 2023