The Richard Bolitho Newsletter

Issue XXI

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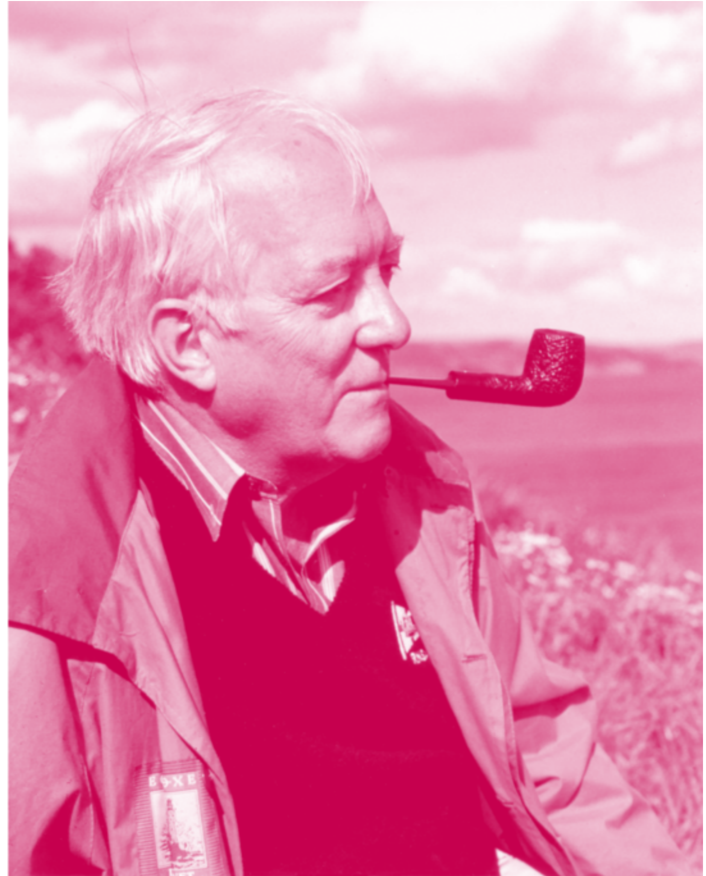

Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent
Photo by Kimberley Reeman

Part One

The Face of the Enemy

During the last decades of the eighteenth century, and at the beginning of the next, the art of ship carving and embellishment had reached its peak, and had begun its decline. It was blamed on a lack of skilled craftsmen, but with every dockyard fully employed after many years of war that seems unlikely. Then, as now, economy would be closer to the truth.

A ship was often judged by the carved décoration around her stern and poop, the 'gingerbread' as it was nicknamed. Often very elaborate and adorned with noble figures and creatures of the deep, it fell to the ship's captain to maintain its appearance out of his own pocket, an expensive investment which had to be constantly replenished.

A would-be volunteer would sometimes gauge his own chances just by looking at it. The bright gold paint was never cheap; it implied that the ship's captain was wealthy and more to the point that he was successful in battle, when prize money was the outcome. The 'gilt on the gingerbread' was well named. It was also a guide to any parent or guardian who might be thinking of "volunteering" his boy for the uncertainties and hazards of the King's navy.

Prize money was always a cause for dispute and resentment. During the nation's darkest days, when the fleet rose in mutiny at The Nore and Spithead and a French invasion seemed imminent, the sentiment of the lower deck was often voiced: 'Let death be shared like prize money – the lion's share to the officers!' Perhaps another reason for the Admiralty's change of heart regarding lavish carving.

But one outstanding embellishment remained, even up to the end of the sailing era and sometimes beyond, the ship's figurehead. Carvers became well known because of their work, and could be found around all the dockyards where ships of war were built, Portsmouth, Chatham, Plymouth and Sheerness, and many more where a keel could be laid, and a hull formed from a wooden skeleton to become what has been described as man's most beautiful creation. A carver may have spared little thought for a ship's carpenter and his crew who were expected to maintain his creation through every kind of storm, the fury of a sea fight, or the greatest enemy of all, rot.

We sometimes forget that after a ship was built and launched there were many places throughout her hull which never again saw the light of day until she was broken up. Ships were required to be at sea, away from any kind of dockyard for months at a time. Like the old seventy-four two-decker *Superb*, one of Nelson's ships. Four years at sea, with never a week in port. They even wrote a ballad about her.

Some figureheads were huge and complicated, with several carved figures, even prancing horses in support of the main carving. HMS *Victory*, berthed at Portsmouth, stirring and eye-catching in her Trafalgar livery, had such a figurehead when

she was built in 1765. It was some twenty-four feet high and eighteen feet broad, representing Britannia, *Victory* and the four winds backed up by a British lion, and surmounted by a deeply unflattering bust of George III. Again, rot had its way, and the figurehead had to be removed and replaced in 1802 by a less elaborate version consisting of the royal arms supported on either side by cherubs: the figurehead which broke the French line at Trafalgar three years later, when *Victory* was already forty years old, or 'young' as they say in the navy.

Warriors and heroes of Greek and Roman mythology. Kings and princes, Shakespearean characters, all grew at the carver's hands. They gave a ship personality, offered hope and pride to her people, identified her to friend and foe alike. And when the smoke of battle parted, it was usually the figurehead which appeared first, driving in to engage at close action, the face of the enemy.

Today when we see the preserved and splendid figureheads at Chatham and Portsmouth, or in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, remember them as they must have been in their glory.

And those crafted for merchant vessels deserve no less attention, their subjects less majestic or warlike, but just as meaningful, an owner's wife or daughter perhaps. A fisherman, or a carved tin miner from an old brig on the Cornish trade routes. Fashioned with skill and patience and, I think, with love. An unsurpassed collection of these can be found at the Valhalla Maritime Museum at Tresco in the Isles of Scilly. Many vessels came to grief amongst those islands, from small drifters to the proud ships of Admiral Sir Cloudesley Shovell's squadron, which foundered in a storm off the Scillies with the loss of nearly two thousand lives.

The new age of iron and steam closed the order book for the ship's carver. But his work lives on

Part Two

The Making of a Seaman

by Kim Reeman

Douglas, you gained invaluable practical experience as a seaman before you were even a commissioned officer.

Yes. I was straight out of school. The thing you have to remember is that *Ganges* doesn't even exist any more, and at that time the only place like it was St Vincent.

What was HMS Ganges *and who went there?*

Primarily it was a training establishment for boy seamen, the seamanship branch, although during World War II there were other ratings (the signals branch) under training as well. It overlooked Harwich Harbour, at Shotley, and the North Sea, of course. Some of the boys who were there were from naval families but mostly they were not, and we had to learn all the rudiments of seamanship

from scratch. You either loved it or you hated it. Everything was at the double. My old seamanship instructor said to me, ‘Here you don’t run, you don't walk, YOU FLIES!’

We learned discipline, tradition and ceremonial, which moulded the incoming volunteers into divisions, which were subdivided into classes. You learned where to stand, how to salute, whom to salute, how to address an officer, how to behave, ranks and badges, and after about a month of that you got down to the really hard stuff of seamanship, gunnery and signals. Everything was done en masse and yet it taught you self-reliance and independence.

What about seamanship?

It was taught using magnificent models to begin with. As a young boy I’d always enjoyed going to toy shops and seeing expensive models at work, so I was absolutely knocked over by these things. For example, they would have the model of a cruiser’s forecastle in the classroom, and everything worked, anchor cables, everything. I thought it was wonderful. When they gave the order for hoisting anchor you'd see where it went . . . I was right there, living it. Then there was basic seamanship, wire and rope splicing, bends and hitches, until you could do it in the dark (had to) right down to the mysteries of slinging a hammock and climbing into one. Boat handling was the next thing – you went out in naval pulling boats, cutters and whalers, and what made it quite splendid to us was that it was in the middle of the busiest harbour in the middle of a war, and you were surrounded by escort vessels from coastal convoys, coming and going all the time, and MTBs [motor torpedo boats], sometimes coming back shot up, sometimes with people laid out on deck, covered up.

Is that when you fell in love with MTBs?

Yes. Because everybody in them seemed very young and very dashing and totally independent. They weren’t, but you got the impression they were running the war on their own. They’d go out at odd times and come in at odd times and you’d see that their torpedo tubes were empty, and you’d wonder what they’d been doing.

Being allowed to go to Harwich was the big thing. You weren’t allowed if you were classed as a backward swimmer, which I was, because I couldn’t swim two lengths of the baths in a duck suit, but I got around that by asking a friend of mine to do it twice, once on his own, and once when they called, ‘Name?’ He said, ‘Reeman,’ and went in. Nobody knew us very well then, so we got away with it. So we were allowed in the liberty boat, a motor fishing vessel, which was picking up sailors going on leave – you’d all tumble out together, real jolly Jack Tars (although they knew you weren’t). All the ships, all the Jacks . . . You’d say anything to pass and get over there, lie, cheat, anything. So I did. It was all very exciting. We also got paid two shillings a day, plus a war bonus of one shilling. I thought it was wonderful; it was

more than I’d ever got!

What about that mast?

Dominated the place, off a ship-of-the-line, about a hundred and twenty-five feet high. Everybody had to climb it, up and out, and it moved, too, in the wind, even though it was fixed to the ground, with yards and the ensign flying. There was a safety net if you fell off, but as it was only a couple of feet off the ground it wouldn't have saved you.

A terrifying experience for one who dislikes heights.

Yes, and as a class leader I had to go first and check the others through and look down from the main top.

You went out on convoys.

We were taken out in the local escorts, small, very new destroyers, Hunt Class. We were detailed off to go but it wasn’t in the training schedule.

How long were you at Ganges*?*

About six months, I think. Then I went to a naval division at Chatham and from there to my first ship, HMS *Windsor*.

At this time you were a C. W. candidate but to all intents a seaman. The V & Ws were terribly crowded.

Only because the equipment they carried had outgrown the ships! Every new piece of equipment needed people to manage it, like Asdic, so they all had to be on board, a hundred and thirty-four people aboard an old destroyer meant to carry many less. There were five sinks for seamen, no shower, no bath; chiefs and petty officers had four handbasins; officers had showers, and the captain had a bath – luxury! I was always standing behind somebody doing something at a basin. You really did learn to wash standing on a pocket handkerchief. They were immensely crowded but very, very happy ships – not even enough room to sling your hammock. I only ever slung mine aboard *Windsor* once and that was in harbour, and half the ship’s company were on leave. But I was embraced by the comradeship of the lower deck, and the brutal humour, something I’ve never forgotten. It was an invaluable insight into that side of life, which has never left me. The way the sailors put up with the awful things they had to see and do, and coped with it all.

Windsor *was your first taste of action.*

I was navigator’s yeoman. She was a heavy-weather ship: we went to Iceland, did convoy duty in the North Sea, went just about everywhere. Ships on fire, ships sinking, people fished out of the drink. I knew what I was getting into, but it was drummed into me at *Ganges*. We were

supposed to bear in mind that about half of us would be killed, but I never thought it would happen to me.

All these experiences simply served to deepen your love of the navy.

Ganges was steeped in tradition, Sunday divisions, inspections, parades. Leave was local only, into Shotley. It was a kind of total immersion, but I'd always had this dream ever since my grandfather took me over the *Victory*, and it has remained with me.

You were seventeen when you left Windsor *and went to HMS* King Alfred*, and became a midshipman. Would you be the same person, or the same writer, if you hadn't had these experiences?*

I don't think so. That same old seamanship instructor said once, 'Wherever you go, the Ganges will stand you in good stead. It's a good place to have been, but it's a bloody awful place to be in!' Except he didn't say 'bloody'. But it remains a kind of touchstone for any one who knew it – 'that bloody mast!' somebody said to me recently, when I mentioned *Ganges*, and his face lit up. But we were all for it. It taught me tolerance, and affection for people, as well as love and respect for the navy and its traditions.

Part Three
Jack Still Had a Word For It

Some naval slang of a later period:

Andrew The Navy. From a Lieutenant Andrew Miller of Nelson's time who was in charge of the press gangs in the Portsmouth and Spithead area. He pressed so many men that it was described as Andrew's Navy.

Bottle A very severe reprimand

Drink up To take a 'bottle' without complaint.

Chief A Chief Petty Officer. Also a senior engineer.

Buzz A messdeck rumour, usually unreliable

Killick A leading hand. A small anchor worn on sleeve to denote rate, ie. Killick Stoker, Killick Coxswain.

Jack Dusty A supply assistant who deals with ship's stores.

Winger To A veery close friend, messdeck term.

Parting Brass Rags The end of a close friendship

Guns The gunnery officer.

Horse's Neck Wardroom tipple, brandy and ginger ale.

Fix Obtaining a ship's position by taking compass bearings of charted landmarks, ie. Lighthouse, beacon, church steeple.

Floater Drifting mine.

Bunts Signals rating. 'Bunting tosser'.

The Bloke The Commander in a big ship.

The Jaunty The Master-at-Arms. Feared and respected. Also 'joss man'.

The Crusher Regulating Petty Officer. Assistant to the Jaunty.

Tin Fish Torpedo.

Buffer Chief Boatswain's Mate.

Snotty Midshipman

God Bosun The Padre. Also 'Bible-Basher'.

Stone Frigate A shore establishment with a ship's name.

Old Man The Captain. Also known as The Owner.

Sippers A sip of a messmate's rum to mark an occasion or payment for a good turn. Alas, no longer!

Pilot The Navigating Officer.

Sparks Telegraphist rating.

Libertymen Men on leave.

Sprog A new entry. One still 'green'.

Number One Wardroom name for First Lieutenant.

Jimmy the One Messdeck term for Number One.

Flat Top Aircraft carrier.

Skimming Dish Fast motor boat.

Fanny Mess kettle.

Stroppy Jack One who knows it all and keeps telling every one!

Jankers Detention quarters, also the 'can' or glasshouse.

Tiddley The peak of naval smartness, in dress or in the appearance of a ship. *Never* used to describe drunkenness.

A Bad Show A disaster.

Ping An echo obtained by Asdic/sonar when detecting a submarine.

Pusser An individual who 'goes by the book',also things relating to the purser, ie. Pusser's jam, Pusser's tobacco, Pusser's clothing. Per regulations.

Hooligan	Oerlikon, a small rapid-firing cannon, WWII.
E.R.A.	Engineroom artificer, or Tiffy.
Scran Bag	For personal gear left lying about a messdeck, a sailor's home and making it untidy. Those guilty can redeem their possessions on payment of a nominal fine.
Roll on my Twelve!	Disgust. Fed up.

Part Four
Relentless Pursuit

It is December 1815, and Adam Bolitho's orders are unequivocal. As captain of His Majesty's frigate *Unrivalled* of forty-six guns, he is required to 'repair in the first instance to Freetown, Sierra Leone, and reasonably assist the senior officer of the patrolling squadron'. But all efforts of the British anti-slavery patrols to curb a flourishing trade in human life are hampered by unsuitable ships, and the indifference of a government more concerned with old enemies made distrustful allies, and the continuing belligerence of the Dey of Algiers, which threatens to ignite a full-scale war.

For Adam, also, there is no peace. Lost in grief and loneliness, his uncle's death still unavenged, he is uncertain of all but his identity as a man of war. The sea is his element, the ship his only home, and a reckless, perhaps doomed attack on an impregnable stronghold his only hope of settling the bitterest of debts.

Part Five
Reeman/Kent Website

If you have access to the Internet, you may wish to visit the Kent/Reeman website designed, in consultation with us, by George and Amy Jepson

of Tall Ships Communications in Kalamazoo, Michigan, USA. The website, in sumptuous colour, features jacket proofs, blurbs and exclusive photographs from the author's private collection, and includes all back issues of *The Bolitho Newsletter* in PDF format, for which we have received many requests.

You may visit the new Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent website at:

www.douglasreeman.com.

Part Six

The Richard Bolitho Figurine

Alexander Kent takes pleasure in presenting this exquisite bone china figurine portraying Captain Richard Bolitho, the hero of his best-selling novels about the men and ships of Britain's eighteenth and nineteenth century navy.

Bolitho wears the uniform of a post captain, as he would have appeared while commanding HMS *Hyperion*, one of he most popular ships in the series.

Each figurine is one of a numbered edition, hand-crafted and authentic in every detail – a remarkable recreation not only of a stirring period, but of an individual.

A limited number of figurines are still available for £100.00 including VAT, postage, packing and insurance. Figurines may be ordered online from the Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent website at:

The Richard Bolitho Figurine

www.douglasreeman.com.