

## FALSE BAY – REFLECTIONS ON SHIPS AND SHIPPING

*Capturing windswept Simon's Town, this photograph shows the sloop **HMS Bridgewater** sailing for Britain around 1947, with wives taking leave of their menfolk on the wharf. Her paying-off pennant flies from the mainmast, commemorating her 20 years' service that included battle honours from the North Sea and the Battle of the Atlantic.*



My neighbour - like his neighbour - is happiest with a heaving deck beneath his feet and sea air, laced with spray, on his face. Thus when we sailed his boat from Simon's Town the two neighbours were of total kindred spirit.

Heading seaward, we passed **SAS Isandlwana**, lying on that day at Simon's Town's outer berth. (Folks at the Waterfront yesterday will have seen her berth with the Indian destroyer **Mumbai** for the Africa Aerospace and Defence exhibition.)

Back to the epic voyage of the intrepid boatmen. Cliffs, coves and caves provided spectacular scenery, while the water was clear to a considerable depth. Indeed, the GPS - global positioning system - indicated fifty metres beneath the keel, confirming the wisdom in the South African Maritime Safety Authority occasionally allowing casualties to anchor in False Bay to effect repairs.

An aged relative once told me of a schoolboy camping expedition to Buffels Bay in the 'thirties. Early one morning, a resounding boom shattered their sleep as gravel from a low cliff below which they were lying fell on them. Wiping the sleep from their eyes, they watched the second full broadside of the day from the cruiser **HMS Amphion** - flagship of the Royal Navy's Africa Station - that was conducting gunnery exercises east of Cape Point.

Ordered to Simon's Town after completing the discharge of her cargo from Britain, **Carnarvon Castle** that had arrived in Cape Town four days after the outbreak of World War 2, steamed past that coastline for conversion to an armed merchant cruiser at the naval dockyard. Wartime troopships, notably **Queen Mary** and **Aquitania** in 1940, as well as numerous warships also came that way to anchor in Simon's Bay, while other vessels limped in with damage from surface raiders, submarines or mines.

When **Windsor Castle** was to make her maiden voyage in 1960, the **Union-Castle** public relations staff in Cape Town made an interesting suggestion. To arrive a day early, ran their proposal, **Windsor Castle** should make a record-breaking run from Southampton, anchor off Cape Town on arrival to embark a few dignitaries by pilot tug, and then steam as close to the Atlantic seaboard as safe navigation permitted. Once round the treacherous Bellows and Anvil Rocks off Cape Point, she should enter False Bay and follow a course past Simon's Town, Muizenberg, Strand and Gordon's Bay, before heading back to Cape Town.

Unfortunately, that creative idea was stonewalled in London, the ship broke no record on that voyage and did her usual "bus trip" to Port Elizabeth.

For Safmarine's 50th celebrations a decade ago, I suggested that two containerships - **SA Vaal** and one of the Big Whites - that were scheduled to sail from Cape Town for Port Elizabeth on the same day should steam in convoy along a similar course around False Bay. For good measure, a couple of naval ships could have practised convoy escort procedures, while certain local radio DJs could have departed from their inane blathering to give the event significant coverage.

Apart from the war years and vessels bringing military cargoes, several merchant ships have used Simon's Town at various times - usually *force majeure* calls such as those made by **Olivebank** after a total blackout in mountainous seas that nearly resulted in the loss of the vessel, and a Lykes vessel that needed urgent drydocking to effect rudder repairs. "Snow" refrigerated ships refitted there two years running in the late 1990s.

Nevertheless, the Safmarine pair would have been the first containerships in False Bay, unless a littoral resident has an earlier recollection.

Alas, those frequenting False Bay beaches did not see the conspicuous white hulls, and, since the ships steamed directly to Port Elizabeth, the DJs continued to blather.

Less illustrious than the Big White containerships, my neighbour's boat came within a cable off the Cape Point lighthouse that has been an important navigational aid since March 1919.

The original lighthouse - an iron structure 271 metres above the crashing surf - began operation in May 1860 but, because of its height, ship's officers simply could not see or hear it when the fog rolled in. Thus, when the Lisbon-bound Portuguese steamer *Lusitania* rounded the Cape on 11 April 1911, the lighthouse was hidden in a fogbank, and the ship hit Bellows Rock.

Even on a calm day, there is a swirl of current around that rock and although all the ship's lifeboats got away, four people drowned when a boat capsized in the surf near Maclear Beach.

That accident accelerated plans to build the current lighthouse that once was reputed to have the most powerful light, visible for nearly forty nautical miles.

Such is the weather in False Bay that the cast iron Roman Rock lighthouse - operating off Simon's Town since 1861 - took four years to build, longer than we have left to build a football stadium!

As our boat closed with Roman Rock lighthouse, two unpleasanties emerged : the southern side of the lighthouse is virtually brown with significant corrosion, while the wires linking the solar panels to the lighthouse are a deathtrap for seabirds as, ensnared in those wires, was a gull that must have experienced a particularly nasty death.

Refreshed by their few hours' at sea, the two neighbours returned to base. For days thereafter, our steps quickened - he in the IT world, and I in maritime education.

All I ask is a heaving deck...

---