

## BULKERS USE FRUIT BERTHS

### *A SIGN OF THE TIMES?*

Being delayed by a shunting train used to be a peril of dockland driving. Durban's Maydon Road - *with its numerous bulk handling facilities* - had so many railway crossings that for a time, it held a record of some sort.

In the heat of Durban's summer, pressurised ships' agents became increasingly frustrated as they waited for a train to shunt, only to be held up at the next crossing.

Local traffic jams were common where the line crossed the foot of South Arm Road, adjacent to the old slipway that now is the synchrolift.

With their driving wheels slipping on the tracks, those old locomotives used to move the refrigerated trucks to the Irvin & Johnson store to load fish for a fast run to Johannesburg.

Grain trucks also were shunted to the elevator in days when this was a grain exporting port. Sometimes those old locomotives struggled to move the heavy, loaded grain trucks, forcing the stokers to work up a real sweat to ensure a good head of steam in the ageing boilers. Fortunately, that line has been taken up, and the only delays now are for Waterfront traffic at peak hours.

On Duncan Road, near J Berth, one can still experience delays as trucks are marshaled to carry grain imports. After discharging a full grain cargo from Argentina, *Iwanuma Maru* sailed on Saturday to cross the South Atlantic to load again at San Lorenzo, one of the grain export ports that stretch from the lower reaches of the Parana River to the estuary of the River Plate.

Local brokers indicate that a typical 30 000-ton grain cargo from that region to South Africa would move at about \$43 per ton, one of the few bright areas - for shipowners - in the handy charter market at present.

In the fruit seasons of yesteryear, one could be held up at the railway crossing near D Berth, but as huge road hauliers now move the fruit from Boland farms, trains blocking that crossing are rare. Hence my surprise the other day to find a shunter waving me to stop as, approaching the crossing was a train, not of refrigerated trucks, but of grain wagons.

Bringing the grain was the bulker *Wisdom C* at B Berth that is part of the fruit export terminal. As there is a lull now before the fruit season begins in earnest, and since the terminal is a little more accessible in several ways than some berths under the direct control of the port authority, it makes sense for grain ships with a draught of less than 12 metres to discharge at the fruit terminal.

In time, most fruit exports will be containerised, leaving space for the bulkers at B and C berths.

When the south-easter generates a heavy chop on the water, spray can be a problem for ships working either fruit or grain at that end of the Duncan Dock. No one likes salty fruit, and wet maize represents a huge claim from underwriters.

With a cargo of steel, the Turkish-flagged *Nemtas 1* was at C Berth, also part of the fruit terminal.

Apart from grain imports, we shall probably see more bulkers bringing steel and cement as the construction industry ratchets up ahead of the World Cup in 2010, and as a considerable number of projects get under way to fulfill the expansion plans of the new owners of the Waterfront. There will also be a huge demand for cement and steel when the container terminal is extended - and that is a matter of urgency.

A few years ago, the port engineers rigged a strange contraption at G Berth to load clinker - bulk cement. The shed became a very dusty storage facility from which a series of conveyors took the cement to the loader, a structure that was fixed, requiring the ship to be warped along the quay so that each hatch could be positioned under the loader, a rather time-consuming process. At the height of the export programme, global charter rates soared to such an extent that a local shipbroker told me that he could not find a ship to move a cargo of cement from Cape Town to Mauritius. The bulk exports did not continue for very long and the loading gear was dismantled.

Now it appears that engineers and stevedores will need to find a way to handle bulk cement imports.

And speaking of bulk cargoes, my dockland ears hear that a Saldanha Bay firm did a magnificent job to ensure that the iron ore loader returned to service earlier than expected. The small-time engineering company simply put their ears back, worked at full stretch for 96 hours, and did the job! Now there is a model for success.

More good news from Saldanha Bay is that, after a lengthy debate, Transnet have called for tenders for the design and construction of dust covers for the port's iron ore conveyors. That should help to minimise the presence of the ubiquitous red dust that characterises everything in the area, and perhaps exports of fruit - discontinued after exporters found iron ore dust over their pallets of fruit - will be resumed from the port. To avoid their shipments being contaminated by dust from the heaps of ore in the stockpile or from the actual loading process, exporters could containerise their fruit shipments.

Since fruit shipments will arrive on huge trucks, no trains will cross the road - and no old steam engines.